

Coping with Fireworks

A Blue House Guide



For some dogs and their owners, the period from October to January can be a stressful time. With Bonfire Night, New Year and religious festivals, fireworks can be heard through a large proportion of autumn and winter and we can't always predict when they will be let off.

The response of noise phobic dogs can be anything from the relatively mild – barking, whining, and hiding – to the extreme – ripping beds apart, trembling and generally destructive and terrified behaviour. If your dog shows any of these symptoms (even the mild ones), please read on.

In the long term

Firework phobias can be difficult to cure, but by taking some time it may be possible to improve matters and reduce the impact that fireworks have on your pet.

'**Sounds Scary**' is an audio programme aimed at desensitising pets to the sound of fireworks. By playing the programme at low volumes all year round your pet will become more used to the sound of fireworks. Used as part of a reward-based training programme, many pets will develop a more positive association with the whizzes and bangs.

This is available as a **free download** from the Dogs Trust website.

Pheromones

When a bitch feeds her puppies, she releases a substance called "appeasing pheromones", the function of which is to reassure the pups that everything is ok. Research has shown that the reassuring properties of canine appeasing pheromone persist even into adulthood. They appear to affect both emotional state and social interaction throughout the dog's life.



ADAPTIL (or DAP) plug-in diffusers release a chemical version of the appeasing pheromone into your home on a sustained basis, helping to calm your dog. This can be used to good effect to reduce the anxiety-provoking effects of fireworks. It is also available as a collar so it can be with your dog all the time.



For many dogs, DAP helps them to settle and relax, and it can be used for during firework season, when moving house, when introducing a new pet or family member (e.g. new baby), in kennels, or any other time when a bit of stress relief would be beneficial.

Ideally we start using a DAP diffuser 2 weeks before firework season. Each refill lasts 1 month.

Don't just ignore the noise phobia problem because it only happens once or twice a year. Instigate a desensitisation programme once the season is over - and don't wait until the bangs start next year before you do something about it!

What to do when the fireworks start

1. Help your pet to cope

Aim to minimise your pet's dependence on people for reassurance; otherwise they will be less able to cope should they be at home alone during a firework party. Help them to develop their own coping strategies instead.

- Create a **refuge** for your pet, where they can hide if they become frightened. This works best if the refuge is chosen by your pet, so concentrate on places they may have hidden in the past. Make sure it is comfortable, warm and contains toys and familiar objects (and preferably things for the owner to do as well, so the dog is not abandoned in the room).
- It is difficult, but **try not to soothe or fuss your pet if they are frightened**. You may inadvertently reinforce their belief that fireworks are something they should be frightened of. Instead, try to remain as calm and neutral as possible.
- Equally, **never punish your pet for hiding, crying or pacing around**. They are only showing this behaviour because they are frightened, and by showing anger you could make their fears worse. Don't try to force your pet to 'face his fears' either.
- If you know of a dog that is not scared by the noises and that gets on with the problem dog, keeping the two together during the evenings may help. Playing with the non-fearful dog may help to reassure the fearful dog that all is not so bad after all.



2. Limit the impact of firework noise

Keeping the sound of fireworks to a minimum can be difficult, but try the following:

- Keep your pet inside at night and walk them in the morning or before it goes dark. If they are outside when a firework happens to go off, it can lead to a fear of going outdoors. Allow your dog outside to toilet before it gets dark, and then keep them inside.
- Close all windows and pull the curtains or blinds; try to keep your pet away from the windows as much as possible.
- Put some music on. It doesn't have to be excessively loud, as long as there is a constant distracting beat to the music.
- Ignore the noises yourself and try to engage the pet in some form of active game. Hollow toys such as Kongs stuffed with the evening meal and treats can be a good distraction method.



3. Medications?

Sometimes, medication can help to make fireworks less stressful. These are not 'quick-fixes' and they should be used in conjunction with the measures described above, but they can help some frightened pets. Speak to us to see which medications could work for your pet.

- **Sileo** – this oral gel is a new anti-anxiety prescription veterinary medication. It is used to help dogs stay calm in event of fireworks but remain fully functional. Sileo works quickly, within 15-60 minutes of administration and can be topped up during a stressful event. We recommend a 'test dose' before the fireworks begin to see if Sileo suits your pet.
- **Diazepam** – this is another prescription veterinary medication which can be used to reduce stress and anxiety in your pet. Please pop in and see us for a chat so we can decide how best to help your pet during the firework season.
- **Anti-stress medications** – there are several products available many of which are very safe and without side effects. Used with other coping strategies, they can be useful for many anxious pets. We will sometimes use Adaptil Stress Relief Now (tablets) or Kalm Aid (tablets, liquid or gel), which are available from reception. Don't forget your ADAPTIL diffuser!

If you have any questions or concerns, please talk to us! Give us a ring on 01782 522100 or call in. Further information is available on our website www.bluehousevets.com and on our facebook page.