

Frightening Fireworks!

Towards the end of October many pets are disturbed by fireworks. Some pets simply find the noises mildly surprising, but others suffer significant distress and develop severe noise phobias that interfere with normal life. The stress involved may even result in physical illness; and some pets may attempt to run away from the noises, becoming lost or injured.

Pets with firework fear tend to get worse every year, showing more extreme distress behaviours and taking longer to recover when the noises stop. Some pets will show altered behaviour (for example hiding, reluctance to exercise) for days or weeks, even during the day when there are no fireworks. Other dogs will progress to develop a fear of other loud noises such as thunderstorms, car doors slamming or things being dropped in the house.

How can we help?

- Keep pets indoors after dusk (move hutches into a shed or garage, walk dogs before dusk, and lock the cat flap!)
- Close windows/ doors and draw the curtains.
- Provide background noise that your pet is used to (radio, TV, washing machine).
- Provide a “den” for your pet to escape to. For dogs this may be an open crate covered with a blanket; for cats it should be an elevated hiding place such as an igloo-style bed on top of a wardrobe. Prepare the den well in advance of the firework season and leave it in place year-round. Occasionally drop treats into the den so that your pet associates the place with good things.
- If your pet is hiding, leave them alone. If your dog copes by pacing and panting, let them do this. However, if your pet is keen to take treats or play a game with you, this is an excellent way of distracting them and rewarding calm behaviour.
- Owners should act as normally as possible. If you usually cuddle and pet your pet then of course you should continue to do this if your pet is seeking comfort. Avoid any cuddling / petting that is excessive or unusual for you or is not being sought by your pet. The best way to behave is like a very calm, jolly role-model, showing your pet that there is nothing to be afraid of. For example, you could play with your pet’s

toys yourself and see if they wish to join in; watch television or do the ironing – whatever you would normally do!

- Some pets can cope well with fireworks when you are in the house with them, but may become very distressed if the fireworks occur when they are home alone – this should not be mistaken for separation anxiety.
- If you know that your pet is likely to find firework season distressing contact the surgery in advance to discuss the use of medication (options are more limited for cats than for dogs). Prescription medication can reduce the panic that your dog feels around fireworks, relieving distress during firework season and preventing worsening of firework and other noise fears in the future. A new medication for noise fear in pets was licensed in 2018 and is available as a tablet given twice daily for the entire 2- 3 week firework period, avoiding the need for owners to guess or be present every time fireworks go off.
- Training recordings of firework noise are available to introduce your pet to a variety of noises (free of charge, at www.dogstrust.org.uk). These can be useful for young dogs and cats to prevent a noise phobia from developing. If your pet already has a fear of noises these recordings may worsen the situation, and should not be used without prior advice from a veterinary surgeon or behaviourist. Please contact the surgery or visit the Acorn House Behaviour Service section of our website at www.acornhousevets.com for further information.