

PREPARING FOR BONFIRE NIGHT WITH YOUR DOG



Many animals are frightened of the loud noises and flashes associated with fireworks and bonfires. Helping them through this time of year can be really challenging, but will be made easier with some advance preparation.

Most dogs will already have a favourite room or hiding place within the house, in which case all we need to do is modify this room to make it even better. For dogs who don't have a refuge, you will need to create one for them. Choose a room which is naturally quiet, with few windows if possible. It is best to prepare the refuge at least a couple of weeks prior to the firework event.

2 weeks before:

- install a DAP diffuser in the home, preferably within the dog's hiding place. This should be left operating 24 hours a day, from 2 weeks before the firework event until 2 weeks afterwards. DAP makes dogs feel much more relaxed and confident, when they otherwise might be stressed, and can be obtained from the practice.
- put in lots of blankets for your dog to dig and burrow in, preferably in a corner where the dog already likes to hide. Include an old, unwashed piece of clothing like a woolly jumper, so that your dog feels close to you.
- close the windows and use heavy curtains to minimise the amount of noise and flashes entering the room from outside.
- provide a bowl of food and water and take your dog out for a wee an hour or so before the display starts.
- leave a few special chews or treats for your dog in the hiding place so he has something to gnaw on to release his tension.
- providing your dog does not mind it, moderately loud rhythmic music with a beat is an effective way to mask the firework noise, so leaving a stereo or radio on at a reasonable volume may help.
- the hiding place must be accessible to the dog at all times, and it's vital that the door is fixed so that the dog cannot be accidentally shut inside or outside of the room.
- in the run up to the display, get your dog used to the hiding place by taking them there 2-3 times a day with a chew or a favourite toy. This will help them understand that it's a good place to go.
- if you know that a firework display is due on a particular evening, give your dog a large, stodgy, carbohydrate rich meal in the late afternoon of that day. Pasta, mashed potato or overcooked rice are ideal, and will make your dog feel relaxed and sleepy as the night draws in.
- make sure your pet is kept in a safe environment at all times so that he doesn't suddenly bolt if a sudden noise occurs. Keep your dog on a lead in public places and make sure that gates, fences and doors are secure.

Products we can provide:

- the DAP diffuser is the most commonly used, and would be appropriate for all dogs. This produces a pheromone that helps to calm and relax dogs.

- Zylkene is a milk derivative in capsule form that can have a mild destressing effect on dogs. It is designed to be given daily, a week or so before it is needed, and then for the duration of the stressful period. It has no side effects and can be given with most other medications.

- Kalm- Aid is a tablet which can be given an hour before the stressful experience is expected and provides a light sedative effect. It's a herbal medication and may not be suitable for all dogs or in combination with some medications.

On the night:

- as soon as the noises start, lead your dog to the hiding place and encourage him to stay there.

- if your dog is scared, don't get cross as it will only make him more frightened. It is tempting to soothe him to calm his fears but this is also unhelpful. It gives your dog the impression that there is something to be frightened of, and rewards him for acting frightened. If your dog comes to think of you as the only person who can soothe the fears, he may panic if fireworks start and you are not there.

- the best approach is to ignore your dog when he is looking scared and only show attention and affection when he begins to cheer up. Then you can give some food treats and play a game as a reward.

- it can also help to keep your dog in a happy mood by playing lots of games and doing little bits of training with some food rewards. This will stop him falling into a state of nervous tension, but don't expect too much!

- ignore the noises yourself and try playing a game yourself or with another pet in the household. This may encourage the frightened pet to join in.

- if your pet cannot be encouraged to play at all, and is very frightened, just lead him to the hiding place.

Having got through the fireworks this year, you ideally need to start to do something long term about your dog's noise phobia. Many dogs can be treated using behavioural methods such as desensitisation and counter conditioning. We use specially made recordings of fireworks to train dogs not to react to the noises they fear. The CD we recommend is called Sounds Scary and can be obtained on Amazon or from www.soundsscary.com

However, it is important to discuss any behavioural treatment with the vet first. These techniques may not be appropriate for all dogs, and some dogs may also require some medication to help them through the treatment process.

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