Firework Fear in Dogs & Cats

Plan ahead to help your dogs or cat have a stress-free bonfire night. Information on how to keep your pets calm.

Firework Fear

Whilst this article refers mainly to the care of dogs, many of the strategies can also be applied to cats. Preparation is all-important if pets are to get through firework night, or similar events, with the minimum of fear and stress.

A Place to Hide

It helps to make a special place where your pet can go to get away from the sounds they hate. In most cases they will already have a favourite room to go to; in which case, all you need to do is to modify this room to make it even more suitable as a hideout. Some pets don’t know where to go to escape and for these individuals, it will be necessary to create somewhere for them to hide. It is best to choose a room that is naturally quiet. One that is located toward the centre of the house with the minimal number of windows is the most suitable. It is best to prepare the refuge at least 2 weeks ahead of the firework event.

Advance preparation: creating a refuge

- Install an Adaptil for Dogs (or Feliway for cats) or Pet Remedy diffuser in the home, preferably close to or inside the chosen hiding place. This should be left operating 24 hours a day for two weeks prior to the firework event until 2 weeks after. These diffusers make pets feel much more relaxed and confident when they might be otherwise stressed. They are available from the surgery. Put in lots of blankets for your dog to dig and burrow in, preferably in a corner where the dog has already tended to dig or hide. Include an old unwashed piece of clothing like a woolly jumper so that your dog can smell your scent and feel comforted by your indirect presence.
- Minimise the amount of noise entering the hideout room from outside and try to prevent them from seeing the flashes of the fireworks as they explode. Close the windows and curtains to make the room as dark as possible.
- Bowls of food and water are essential, and it is a good idea to make sure that your dog has emptied their bladder an hour before the display starts.
- Leave a few special treats for your dog to eat in the hiding place in case your dog fancies something chewy to reduce their tension. However, don’t be alarmed if they are not interested in them – some dogs are simply not interested in treats at a time like this!
- Moderately loud rhythmic music with a good beat is an effective way to mask the firework noises from outside, so put a hi-fi system in the room and keep the volume to a loud but comfortable level. However, every dog is an individual and if yours is not very partial to music at other times you should respect their personal taste!
• The designated hiding place must be accessible to your dog at all time, and it is vital to make sure that doors are fixed so that they cannot accidentally shut and trap them inside or out of the room
• Get your dog used to going to the hiding place 2-3 times each day during the run up to a firework display by taking them there and giving them some food or a favourite chew. This will help your dog to understand that this is 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 on that day. Pasta or a meal with overcooked rice is ideal, and will help to make your dog feel calm and sleepy as the night draws in
• Make sure your pet is kept in a safe and secure environment at all times so that it doesn’t bolt and escape if a sudden noise occurs. Keep your dog on a lead in public places and make sure that gates, fences and doors are secure. It is a good idea to make sure your dog is wearing a collar with a name and address tag even if they are micro chipped. For some animals, prescription medication is necessary, for this book an appointment well in advance of bonfire night.
• (If you have been given medication to reduce your dog’s fear make sure that you follow the prescription precisely).

When the noise starts:

• As soon as the fireworks display starts, lead your dog or cat to the hiding place and encourage them to stay there
• Don’t get cross with your dog if they become scared, it will only make them more frightened
• It is tempting to try to soothe your dog to relieve their fears, but this is the worst thing to do. It gives your dog the impression that there is something to be frightened of, and may even reward them for being scared. Also, if your dog comes to think of you as the only person who can soothe the fears then they may panic if there are fireworks when you aren’t around to help
• Ignore your dog when they are looking frightened and only show attention and affection when they have begun to relax. Then you can give your dog a game and some food treats as a reward
• Finally, it is a good idea to try to keep your dog in a happy mood by playing lots of games and doing little bits of training using food rewards. This will stop them from falling into a state of anxious tension, but don’t expect too much
• Ignore the noises yourself and if your pet is only mildly fearful you could try to engage your pet in some form of active game. Try to appear happy and unconcerned. It can help if you play a game with another pet in the household, because the frightened one may be tempted to join in
• If your pet is very frightened by the noises and cannot be encouraged to play, then lead them to the refuge you have created
• Lastly, having got through fireworks this year you need to start to do something about your dog’s phobia problems. Many dogs can be treated using behavioural methods called desensitisation and counter conditioning. Specially made recordings of fireworks can be used to train dogs not to react to the noises they fear. Visit (https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/dog-behaviour-health/sound-therapy-for-pets) to learn more about sound desensitisation and download sample sounds to help with desensitisation training.