

FIREWORKS

PART 1 ON BONFIRE NIGHT

Dogs and cats

Ideally you should start desensitising your pets to firework noises well in advance of bonfire season (see Part 2 Prevention) but it is easy to forget how upset your pet got until the nights start drawing in.

If bonfire season has crept up on you don't try to start a desensitisation programme; instead plan to help your dog or cat cope.

Many dogs and cats like to retreat to a safe den during fireworks so make sure they have one. For dogs this might mean a crate covered in a blanket, or putting their bed behind the sofa. Cardboard boxes work well for cats! Introduce these safe dens in advance of bonfire season if possible. Some dogs and cats respond well to tight fitting calming vests called Thunder Shirts.

Consider pheromones which can help to relax pets. DAP (for dogs) comes as a collar, diffuser, or spray; and Feliway for cats comes as a diffuser or spray. Both are available from your vet or online, and should be used for a couple of weeks before you expect fireworks to start. Your vet might also suggest herbal and nutraceutical calmers. Some of these act very quickly, others should be given for a week or so before you expect fireworks. For more serious firework phobias your vet may prescribe sedative or anxiolytic drugs, but be sure to book an appointment to discuss these well ahead of time! Some owners find a big carbohydrate meal in the evening helps their dogs be calmer during fireworks, but don't do this if your dog tends to have vomiting or diarrhoea when stressed.

Keep your pet indoors when you know a bonfire event is planned. As people may let fireworks off outside planned event times it is sensible to lock cat flaps after dark and to ensure your dog has been walked before dusk. Close curtains and turn on the lights so flashes outside are less noticeable. If your dog is particularly afraid of fireworks it would be sensible to take him into the garden on a well-fitting collar or harness and lead to toilet during fireworks season, just in case one goes off. Also make sure the garden is secure to reduce the risk of escape.

During a display have the TV or radio on to mask sounds and as a distraction. Some dogs can be distracted during fireworks by play or training exercises, others will want to cuddle up for security, and others will feel best in their den. Be guided by your dog and don't try to make him do anything he doesn't want to. Don't leave dogs which are likely to be distressed by fireworks on their own during displays. The easiest solution for some dogs living close to organised displays can be to go and visit a friend in another village for the evening.

Horses

Most horses will be safest in their stables during firework displays, however make sure someone is watching them and can take action if they become afraid. Some horse will react badly if in an enclosed area as they can feel trapped, and will be better released into a paddock. If your horse is nervous prepare for a nearby event by rugging and booting them to reduce the risk of injury. Your vet may also be able to prescribe either herbal or nutraceutical calmers, or sedatives for badly

affected horses. Alternatively consider moving very nervous horses to stables or field further away from the event.

Livestock

Livestock will startle at the beginning of a display but usually settle fairly quickly when they realise there is no harm. Like horses they may react more badly to being in a confined space. Move sensitive livestock such as in calf cows and pregnant ewes as far from the event as possible and ensure that fences are secure and safe to reduce the risk of injuries.

Small pets

Small pets such as rabbits and guinea pigs being kept outside could be scared by the noise and flashes of fireworks so consider bringing their hutch inside during bonfire season. If you notice a decrease in how much your rabbit or guinea pig is eating visit the vet as stress can cause gut stasis, which can be serious if left untreated.

PART 2 PREVENTION

Dogs

Ideally the breeder of your puppy should start proofing your puppy against noise phobias from as early as two or three weeks old. Being in a busy household and hearing pots and pans crash, vacuums whine, children shriek, and perhaps specific noise CDs while he is too young to be afraid should mean your puppy is less sensitive to sounds once you get him home. This is particularly important with certain breeds such as Border Collies. Continue this training once you bring your puppy home using noise apps or CDs (try the Sound Proof Puppy app <http://www.my-puppy-training.com/> or the Clix Noises and Sounds CD <http://www.companyofanimals.co.uk/product/clix-noises-sounds-cd>).

The same apps/CDs can be used to desensitise older dogs to noises, including fireworks. Start in a place where your dog feels relaxed (such as your kitchen or lounge), and wait until they are doing something pleasant such as eating or playing with you. Then start a noise CD on minimum volume – you may not even be able to hear it. Repeat this daily, gradually increasing the volume. If at any point your dog reacts negatively go back to a lower volume. Once you can play the CD loud, play it in other rooms (go down a few levels of volume). Ideally your dog will notice the noise but return to eating or playing. The next steps are to play the fireworks randomly when the dog isn't already eating or playing. Go right back to low volume and if your dog doesn't react give food treat or play a game. Once your dog seems pretty happy about the CD noises you won't need to practice every day, but some training in the build up to bonfire season is a good idea. Unfortunately the CDs aren't perfect reproductions of fireworks, and may lack some of the high pitched noises only dogs can hear, they also don't come with big flashes in the sky. This means some dogs will desensitise well to CDs but still be afraid of real fireworks, though they usually cope better than before training.

If at any point your dog seems distressed by the training, or you can't progress past very low volume consult your vet for referral to a behaviourist. Some dogs will need medication and general behavioural therapy to get them feeling good enough to start noise desensitisation.

Other Animals

It is possible to use desensitisation programmes with other animals, but it simply isn't practical to try and desensitise whole herds of cattle or flocks of sheep!

The noise CDs discussed above could be used in horses in a similar way to dogs; playing them very softly at first while grooming or feeding the horse, and maybe while schooling him later on. It would be important to carry the desensitisation training on into the evenings, and to be aware that it is harder to protect horses from the startling flashes in the sky.

Cats can be desensitised in the same way as dogs, though training sessions should be shorter.