

## Noise Phobia

### What is noise phobia?

Noise phobia is an exaggerated fear of certain sounds that is most commonly seen in dogs. Cats can also suffer from noise phobia, but because their most common response is often just to go into hiding, their phobia may be more difficult to recognise.

The most common sounds that pets may develop a phobia about are **fireworks and thunderstorms**.

It is unclear why some pets develop a noise phobia. Contributing factors can be genetics (e.g. if the pup's or kitten's parents were also fearful), poor socialisation (lack of exposure to varying environments, people and sounds before 12-16 weeks old), or a traumatic experience related to a loud noise.

### How do I recognise noise phobia in my pet?

The most frequent symptoms noticed by owners of noise phobic dogs are:

- Trembling
- Pacing or frantic running
- Hiding, e.g. behind furniture
- Trying to escape from their current environment, which can cause damage to their teeth/claws or to the area in which they are being kept
- Drooling
- Panting
- Crying or whining
- Attention-seeking
- Inappropriate toileting

As mentioned above, noise-phobic cats generally just go into hiding.

Storm phobic pets often start these worried behaviours before their owners can hear any thunder, suggesting that the pet may be picking up on early signs of an oncoming storm, such as a change in air pressure, darkening clouds, and wind or rain.

### What should I do if my pet is noise-phobic?

Treatment of noise phobia depends on the severity of your pet's fear.

For milder cases (where your pet seems just a little nervous in storms or fireworks, and fine otherwise), it may be enough to "protect" your pet from the noise by giving them a safe place



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to shelter. It is generally best to keep your pet **indoors** with you whenever possible during these times, as many noise phobic pets get injured or lost during fireworks and storm seasons when they escape from the yard in panic. If you have to be out of the house during these times (e.g. at work), strongly consider having a familiar family member or pet-sitter to your house to care for your pet, or else take your pet to boarding kennels or doggy daycare (provided you have explained your pet's noise phobia to them so they know the situation and can take precautions to keep your pet safe).

We would suggest the following for any noise phobic pet:

- **Close any blinds or curtains** so your pet is not reacting to lightning/fireworks lights.
- Try playing **soft calming music or white noise** to help mask the sound of the storm.
- If your pet finds a **safe hiding spot** on their own (e.g. in a cupboard or behind a couch), try to make this comfortable for them by giving them some blankets or a quilt to snuggle up in or under. Otherwise, if your pet is crate-trained and normally likes their crate, give them the option to climb into their crate, and try covering the crate with a blanket so it feels like a safe "hidey-hole".
- Consider the use of calming pheromone (scent hormone) sprays such as **Adaptil** for dogs, and **Feliway** for cats. Spray these onto blankets 10-15 minutes before offering them to your pet (so the alcohol base of the spray has time to evaporate away).
- Consider use of a "**Thundershirt**". This is a calming aid for some pets, but is best tried for the first few times on regular (non-stormy) days when they are already calm and happy, so they have time to get used to it.
- Try offering your pet some **tasty chew treats or puzzle/food toys** (e.g. Kong filled with peanut butter or cheese), or playing a calm game with them, to try to give them some pleasant distraction. However, don't force the issue if your pet is too nervous to eat or play.
- Try to have taken your dog out to toilet before the noisy event starts. However, if your dog needs to toilet during the storm, place them on lead with a secure harness or collar to take them outside, so they can't run off if they get frightened. For noise phobic cats, have a litter tray inside for them to use if they wish.
- It is OK to **calmly comfort your pet** if they come to you for reassurance. Never punish your pet for being afraid, or for being destructive or toileting inappropriately during these times - punishing them will only worsen their fear and make the noise phobia more severe.

If your pet still seems very fearful despite these supportive measures (especially if they seem at risk of hurting themselves in panic), or if they seem anxious about some other things too, we would strongly advise consulting one of our vets for advice. Pets with moderate to severe noise phobia or generalised anxiety generally benefit most from starting:

- Appropriate **anti-anxiety medication** AND
- A program of **behavioural modification**

### **What does anti-anxiety medication involve?**

It is important to know that medication alone is usually not enough to treat moderate to severe noise phobia. However, it is very helpful to help control your pet's fear and anxiety to allow behavioural modification techniques to work.

Ideally, your pet will have some basic blood tests done prior, both to ensure there is no medical cause of their behavioural issues and to make sure that their organs are functioning well enough to safely tolerate any new medications.

Depending on your pet's particular issue, they may require 1-2 medication types:

- **An “as-needed”/event medication:** This medication is ideally given 1-2 hours prior to any storm or fireworks event for best effect (or else as soon as possible after the start of the event). This medication is most important, as it helps to prevent intense bursts of panic in your pet. Common examples include:
  - Alprazolam
  - Trazodone
  - Gabapentin
  - Clonidine
- **Long-term “background” anti-anxiety medication:** These medications are a useful addition for pets who have severe noise phobia issues (e.g. reactivity to multiple sounds, or sounds that occur frequently), or generalised anxiety in other aspects of their life. These medications may take several weeks to build up to full effect. It is also very important not to stop these medications without veterinary advice, as many should be weaned down slowly to prevent withdrawal symptoms in your pet. Common examples can include:
  - Fluoxetine
  - Clomipramine
  - Amitriptyline

The type of medication chosen will depend on your pet's age and any other medical issues they might have, plus the severity of their phobia. Sometimes, the vet may have to carefully trial several different types of medication, one at a time, before they can find the one that best helps your pet.

### **What does behavioural modification involve?**

A behavioural modification program is a “brain-retraining” program which is generally best overseen by either a veterinary behavioural specialist or behaviouralist, or a suitably-qualified pet trainer.

These exercises need to be done consistently during calm times, and eventually help to reprogram your pet's excessive response to noise.



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It generally involves techniques such as:

- Relaxation training - this involves a series of exercises that teach pets to relax using certain positive training commands, activities or objects (e.g. relaxation mats). If correctly done, eventually the animal can be triggered to relax on cue, even in unusual situations.
- Desensitising or Counter-conditioning - this involves carefully pairing audio of the noise your pet is scared of (initially very short amounts at low volume) with highly rewarding, "happy" experiences for your pet, such as treats or play. This generally works best for sounds such as fireworks, and may be more complicated with storm phobia (where your pet may be reacting to other aspects of the storm, such as wind or changes in air pressure).

If your pet has generalised anxiety, your vet or trainer will also discuss suitable programs for exercise, play, training, "chill-out" time, and environmental enrichment for your pet.

Please ask one of our vets if you have any further questions about noise phobia in your pet.

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