

# Dealing with noise phobias

**As Bonfire Night or New Year's Eve approaches, many owners begin to dread their pet's response to the inevitable noise of fireworks.**

Fear is a perfectly normal emotion which helps individuals deal with dangerous situations – either by attacking, or by running and hiding (fight or flight). However, when placed in a situation where neither of these reactions is possible, the ensuing panic attack may lead to injury to your pet as well as damage to your property.

Many cats and dogs are afraid of loud and sudden noises and in some individuals the fear becomes extreme, leading to:

- Shaking
- Salivation
- Howling, barking or hissing
- Loss of bowel and bladder control
- Destructiveness
- Hiding or running away

These reactions may become more marked the longer the noise continues and often continue long after the noise has stopped. If you ignore this problem, it is likely to worsen with repeated exposure. Therefore it is important to find coping strategies for you and your pet, and you may find the following hints useful:

1. Never show any reaction to fireworks yourself. If you get cross, your pet becomes even more frightened. If you soothe your pet and give special attention, you not only reinforce the feeling that there is something nasty happening, but also inadvertently reward the fearful behaviour. Instead, give the impression of being jolly and unconcerned and only give rewards (food treats or a game) once he/she has begun to relax.
2. If there is another (unaffected) pet in the household, start a game – the frightened one may be tempted to join in. Use toys and chews as distractions.
3. Dogs and cats have very sensitive hearing, sight and sense of smell. You can help mask the noises by playing reasonably loud music with a rhythmic beat, minimize the flashes by drawing thick curtains and leaving the indoor lights on and disguise the gunpowder smell by using a room spray or burning joss sticks.
4. Prepare a safe haven where your pet can hide – somewhere relatively soundproof with few windows. For a dog prepare a den in a corner – either a nest of old blankets with an old unwashed jumper to provide reassurance or an upturned box with a carpet flap for entry and suitable bedding. Cats often feel safer when up high – prepare a box or little nest on a high shelf. Make sure that the door to the room is propped open so that your pet can access the area whenever scared but does not feel trapped. A couple of weeks beforehand start encouraging your pet to use the area by feeding treats there several times daily. At the same time install a pheromone diffuser as close to the area as possible and leave it switched on – this will provide a calming influence.

5. Ensure that your pet is secure at all times to prevent escape and bolting, whether indoors or outdoors. For dogs this means using a safe collar/harness and lead and exercising well before and after the peak firework time. Cats should have access to a litter tray and the cat flap should be locked before it gets dark. Everyone in the household should be aware of the need to keep doors, windows and gates securely closed. Each November the animal shelters report a huge increase in the number of lost, unidentified and unclaimed pets. Consider having yours microchipped now so that if he/she panics and escapes, you can be reunited as soon as possible.
6. Use a high carbohydrate diet to decrease anxiety – feed a meal including cooked wholemeal pasta, mashed potato or stodgy rice, preferably in the late afternoon. Add Brewers yeast to increase the vitamin B6 level.
7. Avoid sedatives – this may seem an obvious solution but will often exacerbate the problem next time. Not only do sedatives increase sensitivity to noise, but also lower your pet's control of the situation through drowsiness and loss of coordination, thereby leading to increased fear levels.
8. Employ de-sensitisation/counter conditioning methods. There is no doubt that these methods are the most effective and long lasting at easing the symptoms associated with noise phobias. However, they do not supply a quick fix so try to start at a time of year when your re-training is unlikely to be interrupted by the frightening noise. The idea of systematic desensitisation is to gradually allow your pet to become less fearful and more relaxed when hearing the trigger noise. We have a 'Crash, Bang, Wallop' CD which comes with detailed instructions as well as an assessment chart for monitoring progress. By exposing your pet to slowly increasing levels of the frightening noise whilst in a relaxed mode, the fear is gradually overcome. If followed to the letter, taking heed of your pet's response and not trying to achieve too much too soon you should gradually see results.

