

Fireworks & dogs.

Firework season is approaching quickly. Many dogs (and other animals) suffer during this time due to noise sensitivity, fear and anxiety. Whilst this can be a worrying few weeks for our canine companions, there are a few steps we can take to plan ahead and make the experience as stress free as possible.

Safety first: accidents happen, doors may get left open and scared dogs can slip out and run away. In order to be truly prepared if the worst were to happen, ensure your dog's microchip details are up to date (address and phone number are vital) and keep a collar on them with your contact details. This ensures that if your dog were to escape or become lost, they can be tracked back to you and returned much quicker! To avoid this, you can think about installing a baby gate as a safety management to prevent access to your front door. If you have a back garden, double check your back gate is locked and only take your dog outside on a leash after dark to prevent them from getting caught off guard and frightened.

A few weeks in advance: If you already know your dog has a strong phobia of fireworks/loud noises, it will be worth speaking to your vet in advance and asking them to prescribe anti-anxiety medication for the night of the fireworks such as bonfire night and new year's eve. Whilst this isn't necessary for every dog, there are a few dogs who have such strong fears that they require a little extra support to help them get through the night. This is beneficial as it also prevents further negative memories from forming and allows your dog to rest during the night.

Another vital step you can take to help prepare your dog for firework season is to begin desensitising them to the sound and pairing it with something they find enjoyable. This is a behaviour modification process used by Certified Canine Behaviourists in order to overcome fear and anxiety.

- 1) Begin by playing the sound of fireworks on your phone (you can search for the sound on YouTube) everyday, starting at the lowest volume. After 2-3 seconds of playing the sound, offer your dog some tasty treats or even their dinner if they love their meals! If your dog prefers toys over food, you can play a fun game with them whilst the sound is playing.
- 2) Ensure the sound isn't very close to them, but keep it a few metres away so that they can hear it. Play the sound for 20-30 seconds, ensuring your dog is constantly having some tasty treats/toy play whilst the sound is on. When the sound stops, the treats/play should stop! We are teaching the dog that the scary sound of the fireworks always predicts something enjoyable, and once the sound stops, the good thing also stops. The dog then begins to look forward to hearing the sound.
- 3) Do short sessions of 2-3 minutes, twice a day. Gradually increase the volume by one point every day. If your dog has a very strong fear, then increase the volume only every few days to give them more time to acclimatise

On the night: When the day arrives, ensure you give your dog a fun, long walk in the morning and again in the early afternoon, before the sun starts to set. Let them run around if possible, but also focus on letting them sniff a lot on their walk. Sniffing naturally makes dog's feel good and produces a positive state of mind. This will help to tire them out both physically and mentally and may help them rest in the evening.

Prepare a safe space for your dog to retreat to if they wish. An open, covered (with blankets or towels) crate helps to create a safe 'den' for your dog. For nervous dogs, this is a great idea all year round to give them their own private space. Set this up away from windows (keep windows covered with blinds/curtains), in a quiet area of the house but ensure it is where you will be spending your time also – if your dog is frightened of fireworks, it's important that you are there to comfort them. There is a myth that you shouldn't comfort your dog when they are scared, but this simply isn't true. You don't need to over-coddle them, but do provide some gentle touches and a reassuring tone of voice.

Turn on the TV and play some music in the background – Classic FM usually provide 'Pet Sounds' during firework season; classical music has been shown to reduce stress in dogs, so play this throughout the night to mask the sounds outside.

In addition to the home changes for the night, you may also wish to look into natural anxiety relief aids. *Adaptil* and *Pet Remedy* both produce a plug in diffusers. They are slightly different, but both aim to reduce overall stress in the dog. You can use one or even both, in the room the dog spends most of their time. Finally, you can also purchase an anxiety supplement called *Nutracalm*. This is non-prescription and non-sedative, but can only be purchased from a Veterinary receptionist. Call your vet in advance and ask if they stock the product, if they don't, you can call other local vets to check.

Finally, give your dog plenty of calming enrichment. Activities which encourage licking, sniffing and chewing all naturally help to reduce stress. You can purchase items such as Kongs, snuffle mats, lickimats and puzzle feeders. Give your dog some safe & tasty food inside their new enrichment toy and allow them to keep busy as the fireworks set in.

This website has wonderful ideas for foods which you can stuff into a Kong or Lickimat etc <https://www.puppyleaks.com/healthy-foods-you-can-stuff-in-a-kong/>