

Calming your dog's anxiety during noisy Fourth of July

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LuKaS Cuba. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Dog owners everywhere feel a pang of anxiety as the Fourth of July approaches. Will their pooch simply hide under the bed when fireworks go off or run for the hills? If you're the owner of a dog with noise phobias, what can you do?

University of Washington psychologist James Ha, a specialist in animal

behavior, has several suggestions, each with its own set of [pros and cons](#).

Ha, an associate professor with a side business as an animal behavior consultant, says there are three main ways to handle noise [phobias](#): management, treatment and drugs.

Management involves removing the dog from the situation. Owners might put their pets in the basement with [loud music](#) on so they don't hear the fireworks. Others may take their dog to a kennel far removed from potential fireworks. Many kennels offer special Fourth of July programs.

If you choose the kennel-in-the-country option, Ha says it's important that your dog is already comfortable with the kennel; for example, it should be a kennel you use regularly when you're on vacation. Don't just drop [dogs](#) off at a new kennel on the Fourth of July and expect them to be happy.

Treatment options can include special wraps that apply gentle [acupressure](#), or counterconditioning to replace an undesirable response to a stimulus (fear) with a positive one.

Ha and two researchers from Tufts University in Boston recently published a paper on the effectiveness of a product called [Anxiety Wrap](#) for calming dogs during [thunderstorms](#). Ha says there are many similar products that all work essentially the same.

"The Anxiety Wraps work for some dogs and they work for acute situations, or short-term situations," Ha said of the research, which was funded by the company that makes Anxiety Wrap. "The distinction is, most [dog bites](#) and [aggression](#) is related to fear and anxiety – of children, of cars, of men – it's a chronic thing. So the Anxiety Wrap is not going to work on those situations. It's not a magic solution for all forms of

anxiety."

However, Ha says the method that works every time to relieve dogs of anxiety is counterconditioning. But it's not exactly easy.

"It's tedious, it's time consuming, but it fixes the problem. This is the technique that actually makes the problem go away," Ha said.

Counterconditioning involves presenting the scary [stimulus](#) but at a level that doesn't completely freak out your dog, then rewarding the dog for behaving. In a nutshell, "Set off a lot of fireworks, then give your dog a lot of hot dogs," he said.

For example, get a recording of fireworks and play it, but not too loud. If your dog gets anxious but doesn't completely go bonkers, then reward it with a spoonful of peanut butter, a piece of steak or liver, or your dog's favorite treat. Ha suggests doing this two or three times a day. After about three times the dog will begin to get anxious, then calm down and start looking around for the food treat. After about a week, most dogs have been conditioned to accept the noise.

The third solution is to have your veterinarian prescribe an anti-anxiety drug. Ha says such drugs work well in dogs for acute, one-time situations.

"They're very effective, but just like humans, you have to find the right one, you have to find the right dose" Ha said.

Drugs also help lower some dogs' anxiety threshold enough to work on counterconditioning. Once the counterconditioning has worked, then you can take your dog off medication. Ha says he rarely sees a dog so anxious that it needs to be on meds for the rest of its life.

"If all you're talking about is a few nights, the dog is happier, the dog is better off by not exhibiting anxiety, by not biting or snapping," Ha said.

Provided by University of Washington

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