

Dogs, thunderstorms and fireworks: The fear is real

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Some dogs escape when a loud noise frightens them. Credit: Unsplash

Dogs with noise phobias show symptoms including panting, pacing and hiding. They are often so frightened they try and escape and can sustain injuries in the process. Because of this, fearful dogs can be a danger to

themselves.

A [phobia](#) is an excessive and persistent fear of a specific stimulus or situation. Any animal can develop a phobia to almost any situation or stimulus. In [dogs](#), the most common phobias relate to thunderstorms and [loud noises](#).

Dr. Jenni Green, University Veterinary Teaching Hospital Camden Veterinary Director and Small Animal Veterinarian explains: "Dogs that exhibit thunderstorm or [noise](#) phobias have very intense symptoms. These can include panting, pacing, whining, drooling, hiding, and destroying things around the house. They're often so frightened they will try and escape. Many dogs go missing during storms or fireworks. They often go through windows and doors and sustain injuries in the process. Dogs with noise phobias appear to chain events together and, over time, start to show signs of fear even before a storm. It can get to the point where they are fearful just from rain. We call this generalizing."

Since we know noise and storm phobias often go hand in hand with other anxiety conditions, there's good reason to seek veterinary advice for pets appearing to suffer during noise events. With forward planning, your veterinarian may be able to prescribe treatment.

"Medication can reduce the level of fear and anxiety in order to allow other storm or noise phobia treatment methods to work, such as the use of thunder shirts or safe zones," says Dr. Green.

Thunder shirts apply a gentle and constant pressure on the pet's torso. Using pressure to relieve anxiety is a common practice. The pressure works in a similar manner to swaddling an infant.

A safe zone is an area pets can access during storms or fearful situations. You can enhance safe zones by adding sound proofing, a white noise

machine and a comfy bed. It's ideal to make sure that they always have access to this area, even when you're not home.



Murphy "on the couch" at his behaviour consultation, relaxing near an Adaptil diffuser. Credit: Camden Valley Animal Hospitals

Your dog will often choose their own safe zone but it might be:

- a bathroom
- interior closets
- under or behind furniture

In a recent study, almost 75 percent of pets were frightened of fireworks. Only 30 percent of owners sought help for their frightened pet.

"The message we need to get out there is that vets can help," says Dr. Green. "There are lots of treatment options that can be considered. No one wants their pet to be terrified or worse, get lost or injured, because they are scared."

In one case: Murphy was nine years old when his family was referred to a behavior vet for his severe noise phobia. He had caused thousands of dollars of damage to the house during thunderstorms, when he would panic and run around the house or try and escape, smashing valuable ornaments and ruining two sets of new blinds in the lounge and family rooms. He did get out onto the road once but luckily was rescued by kind neighbors.

Murphy's family was afraid he would seriously injure himself and found it heart-wrenching to witness his obvious distress during storms. They changed their [work schedules](#) in order to make sure someone was at home if there was a storm predicted.

Murphy's behavior vet diagnosed him with an anxiety disorder with noise phobia as the main presenting problem. Medical problems were ruled out by his referring vet and he was started on medication straight away. His family continued to manage their [work time](#) during storm season for a while and they began some behavior modification exercises with Murphy, including establishing a safe haven for him in their garage.

This was very successful and by six weeks Murphy was going so well his family felt confident to buy new blinds. He was a lot more comfortable in storms and could even go for a walk or play games during storms. Now his family can go to work without worrying about whether there

will be a [storm](#) while they're gone.

They keep a diary and video records of Murphy's progress to show his behavior vet at their six-monthly checks and he has started to wean off some of his medication after about 18 months. "He is a lovely little fellow and everybody is so pleased to see him happy now," says Dr. Green.

More information: Stefanie Riemer et al. Not a one-way road—Severity, progression and prevention of firework fears in dogs, *PLOS ONE* (2019). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0218150](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0218150)

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