

## **Is your pet scared of fireworks?**

**If your pet is afraid of loud or sudden noises life can be miserable for both of you. Fireworks and thunderstorms can leave your pet a nervous wreck, however, you can follow some simple tips to help your pet through expected and unexpected loud noises. But to find a long term solution you will need to follow a more comprehensive treatment programme. In more complex cases you should seek professional advice.**

## **What are noise phobias?**

Fear is an adaptive emotion that helps animals avoid danger, whereas a phobia can be described as an irrational fear of something that does not pose a threat. There are a number of reasons why animals can develop noise fears and phobias, including a lack of exposure to loud noises during the sensitive developmental stage as a young animal. Cats and dogs that have been reared in a noisy and busy environment or have been sufficiently exposed to a range of noises during this important developmental period are less likely to develop fearful responses to noises as adults.

## **Recognising a fearful cat or dog**

Pets that are fearful of loud and sudden noises can display a range of behaviours that vary between individuals and between species. Cats will likely display a fearful posture with hair standing on end and ears flattened back and they may run away, hide under or behind furniture or on a high surface or toilet inappropriately. Dogs may tremble or shake, bark excessively, run away, hide behind or under furniture, pant, salivate, pace, soil the house and refuse to eat.

## **Keep your pets safe**

On nights when you expect fireworks keep your pets indoors, close all windows and lock cat flaps. Make sure you walk your dog earlier in the day, while it is still light and therefore there is less chance of fireworks being let off, and provide your cat with a litter tray. You should bring hutches inside or put them into an outhouse such as a garage. Covering the sleeping compartment of the hutch with a thick blanket will help muffle the sounds. You should also bring horses and donkeys into their stables. Make sure your pet is microchipped in case they do escape.

## **Help them to cope**

Make sure your pet has a hiding place they can retreat to if they are frightened. Before the fireworks season starts encourage them there with food treats and toys so that they are likely

to go there and feel secure when they are frightened. Allow them to go there and leave them undisturbed until they decide to come out. After dark you should close your curtains and switch your lights on to block the flashing lights of the fireworks and put on music, the radio or the TV to drown out the sound of the fireworks. If your pet becomes interested in the noises or looks distressed then do not become worried yourself or punish him as this could make him more fearful - acting normally will help to reassure your pet. Giving your pet attention if he seeks it at this time will help to make him feel less frightened but over time coming to you for reassurance might become your pet's only coping response. Therefore it is a good idea to encourage and reward an alternative and independent coping response, such as going to a sound-proofed den so that your pet can cope in your absence. If, however, your pet is not bothered by the fireworks then reinforce this behaviour by playing a game or giving attention to your pet.

If your pet is very fearful then speak to your vet as they might be able to provide some short term solutions to help your pet through the fireworks season. This may be medication, a food supplement or a synthetic pheromone diffuser (Feliway<sup>®</sup> for cats and Adaptil<sup>™</sup> for dogs) that may help keep them calm.

### **Help your pet in the long term**

If your dog or cat reacts strongly to fireworks or other loud noises you should follow a treatment programme that will reduce your pet's fear of loud noises. You can try this yourself by using a sound desensitisation CD or for more severe cases you should consider asking your vet to refer you to a behaviour specialist to address the noise phobia in the long term.