

Thunderstorm Phobia

By Michelle Posage, DVM



Has this ever happened to you? It is nighttime and you are in a sound sleep. Out of nowhere, your dog jumps onto the bed and frantically attaches himself to your head. It takes a few moments for you realize the sound of rain in the background and just then there is a clap of thunder sending your dog under the covers.

If this sounds familiar, you are the owner of dog with a storm phobia. Take heart; you are not alone. During this time of year I get many calls from sleep deprived clients who are kept awake by the panicked behavior of their dogs. In fact, thunder and fireworks are the most common noise phobias treated by veterinary behaviorists.

A phobia is a fear response that is persistent, irrational, and out of proportion to the situation. Sometimes a phobia can be traced back to a traumatic event like being caught outside in a severe storm, however most thunderstorm phobias develop gradually without an inciting event.

Phobias do not get better with time. Each storm seems to reinforce the anxiety it provokes. The anxiety will worsen and the dog will react to the subtler changes in the environment that precede a storm. For example, a dog with a mild fear will only become anxious when thunder actually occurs, but a severely affected dog will begin to panic when the skies darken and the wind picks up.

Dogs with storm phobias will usually pant, whine, and pace. Some try to seek solace by climbing into their owners' lap, while others frantically seek an escape from the storm. These dogs will sometimes cause damage to doors, cages, windows and themselves in an attempt to get away from the thunder. One of the worst cases I have seen involved a dog that jumped out of a second story window three times in one summer. Another patient of mine had a tendency to want to hide in the bathroom. This poor dog would run into the bathroom and nudge the door shut. Ironically, he would spend the remainder of the storm frantically trying to escape from the bathroom by digging at the door.

The best time to remedy a storm phobia is in the winter when there is no thunder. Most dogs will respond to a behavior modification program involving repeated exposure to recorded thunder and storm noises played at low volume. The dog is encouraged to engage in an enjoyable activity such as chewing on a bone while listening to the thunder. The volume is gradually increased at subsequent sessions until the dog is listening to a full volume storm without anxiety symptoms. It is best to seek the help of a qualified behaviorist to set up such a program. If done incorrectly, this type of program will worsen the problem.

Most storm phobic dogs are also afraid of the noise from fireworks. Both noise phobias can be managed similarly. Here are a few suggestions for this coming July 4th and the rest of the summer.

- **Bring your dog inside.** Your dog may want to be in the basement during a storm, where the noise of the thunder, rain, and wind is less audible. However, you may need to stay down there to keep him company. Alternatively, close your windows and turn on a fan or air conditioner to provide some background noise.
- **Avoid reinforcing fearful behavior.** Although it is natural to want to reassure your dog by giving him extra attention, this may only encourage the unwanted behavior.
- **Keep your dog safe.** Confinement generally worsens the problem and dogs will severely hurt themselves trying to escape. Consider keeping your dog at a daycare facility or with a friend when you need to leave on a stormy day.
- **Redirect your dog's attention.** A dog with a mild anxiety can sometimes be convinced to chew on a special bone or play with a favorite toy.
- **If your dog has found a safe place to hide, let him.** Do not try to force him to be with you. Fearful dogs sometimes become aggressive when physically handled or restrained.
- **Medication may be necessary for dogs** with severe or self-injurious behavior. Your veterinarian may require an exam before prescribing medication. A dog with severe or chronic problems should be seen by a veterinary behaviorist who is familiar with the use of anti-anxiety medications and behavior modification protocols.

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