

Coping with Fear of Fireworks

A Newsletter from Armstrong Mobile Vets



I am writing to you as we usually have lots of enquiries about what we can do to help dogs who are scared of fireworks and this year was no exception. Unfortunately, by the time we all start thinking about the stress of fireworks night it is already too late to use some of the most effective methods of calming them such as noise CDs and plug in pheromone diffusers.

Our understanding of how to treat dogs who are scared of fireworks is improving all the time and, recently there have been some important updates on the use of different sedatives to control the worst affected animals which may be of interest to you if your pet is one of the unlucky few who becomes more upset each year.

First of all a bit of background you have probably heard before about looking after our dogs on the worst nights of the year.

Be prepared:

We are lucky that generally it is possible to predict when fireworks are likely to be set off. Prepare by making a shelter to provide some security, a cardboard box with a duvet over the top to dampen sound works well. However dogs often decide for themselves where they feel safest and if they do hide somewhere they are usually best left alone.

If you can take your dog for a good long walk in the afternoon and also give them a meal shortly before the evening time so they will settle more easily.

Try and leave as many internal doors open as possible so they do not feel trapped but close windows and external doors and turn up any background noise such as televisions and radios.

Unfortunately in many cases our natural reaction to comfort a distressed dog will make their fear worse. Simply by paying attention to their behaviour when upset we can reinforce the idea that fireworks are something they should be frightened of. The best way to cope is to prepare for the evening as best you can and then ignore them unless they are calm and behaving normally in which case they can have all the attention they need.

Longer term strategies:

If your dog is often worried by fireworks then a very useful way to try to cure this problem is by using a fireworks noise CD to desensitise them to the sounds. This program should be followed carefully and ideally should be done in consultation with a vet or animal behaviourist and in many cases then removes the need for any other form of treatment. This treatment however, does need to be started a few months in advance of the fireworks season.

If there is only a few weeks to go until fireworks will be set off then, in mild cases, Pheromone diffusers such as the DAP diffuser can work well. These are plugged in to a socket near where dogs spend the most time and using a synthetic version of dog calming pheromones help to reassure and calm anxious dogs. Ideally they should be plugged in 1-2 weeks before the fireworks start going off. If they work then we can often avoid having to give anxious dogs medication to calm them.

Medications:

Some people use herbal remedies and find that these work well for their dogs (e.g. **'Rescue Remedy'** and **'Skullcap and Valerian'** treatments).

For the last year or so we have been using **'Zylkene'** capsules as a natural product that helps calm anxious pets in a variety of situations including firework stress. These capsules should be started 1-2 days before the fireworks start.

For those pets where none of the above are helpful and they need sedatives to calm them we have traditionally prescribed **'ACP'** sedatives in the form of little yellow tablets. These make your pets sleepy and drowsy. Animal behaviourists and vets are now moving away from this type of sedative as though they work well for many dogs for some with profound fears we think that, although they are sedated, they can remain fearful and have bad memories of the experience.

We are now prescribing **'Xanax'** tablets which reduce anxiety, have a calming effect and also help to block the memory of the 'bad' experience and therefore avoid worsening of the fear. **'Xanax'** may not make your pet as sleepy as **'ACP'** but should be a better treatment in calming and reducing anxiety. In addition they don't reduce blood pressure and put stress on the cardiovascular system like **'ACP'** tablets tend to do and are therefore safer to use even in elderly or frail pets. Sometimes they need to be used 2-3 times to find the right dose for your pet so a trial run before the worst nights of the year can be useful.

Whichever sedatives you use, they should ideally be given before the fireworks start- about an hour before is ideal.

If your pet normally has sedatives prescribed we can certainly continue to give you **'ACP'** tablets if they work well for you but would suggest you try **'Xanax'** to see if we can help your pet to cope better with this difficult problem. Please call us and we can discuss a suitable regime for your pet.

We are concerned about the few dogs that get progressively worse each time they hear fireworks and are difficult to keep calm and if yours is one of these please give us a phone call and we would be happy to have a chat and make a plan about how best to treat your animal. We can always be contacted on: 01453 543516.

We hope you and your pets have a happy New Year from all at Armstrong Mobile Vets