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Helping people to help pets

A Free PetLine UK Course

Preparing Your Dog or Cat for Fireworks

Introduction

Fireworks can be difficult for dogs and cats. Sudden loud noises, flashes of light and vibrations can cause fear or distress, and individual animals vary considerably in how strongly they react.

Some pets may simply become unsettled, while others can become extremely frightened. A pet that previously appeared comfortable around fireworks may also develop a fearful response, particularly following an unpleasant experience.

Preparing in advance can make a significant difference. Where possible, don't wait until fireworks have already started before thinking about what your pet might need.

Although Bonfire Night is a predictable time for fireworks, displays and private celebrations can continue over several days. Fireworks are also increasingly common around New Year and at other celebrations throughout the year.

This course explains how to prepare your home, help your pet become accustomed to recorded firework sounds, consider additional calming support and respond appropriately when fireworks occur.

Remember: Every pet is an individual. What helps one dog or cat may not help another.



1. Preparing Before Fireworks Begin

If you know fireworks are likely, plan your pet's routine in advance.

Dogs

Try to walk and toilet your dog before fireworks are expected to begin. This reduces the likelihood of needing to take them outside during a display.

Check that doors, gates and other exits are secure. Make sure your dog's identification and microchip details are up to date.

Even a normally confident dog may react unexpectedly to a sudden explosion. Avoid unnecessary outdoor activities during periods when fireworks are likely.

If your dog needs to go into the garden, supervise them carefully. Don't assume that a familiar, secure garden will prevent a frightened dog from attempting to escape.

Cats

Encourage your cat to come indoors before fireworks begin, particularly if they normally spend time outside.

Make sure windows, doors and cat flaps are secure. Provide access to their usual resting places, food, water and litter facilities.

Some cats prefer to hide during noisy events. Ensure they can reach familiar, comfortable places without being disturbed.

Avoid pulling a frightened cat out of hiding simply because you would prefer them to remain near you.

Keep routines familiar

Try to keep household activities as normal as possible.

Preparation should help your pet feel secure rather than signal that something frightening is about to happen.

Feed, exercise and interact with your pet in the usual way wherever practical.

2. Creating a Comfortable Environment

Reduce outside disturbances

Close curtains or blinds before fireworks begin. This can reduce flashes of light and some of the visual disturbance from outside.

Blackout curtains or blinds may be particularly useful for pets that react strongly to sudden flashes.

Closing windows can also help reduce some outside noise.

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Let your pet choose

Provide access to familiar, comfortable places where your pet normally likes to settle.

Don't assume that the location you consider safest will necessarily be the one your pet prefers.

Some animals want to remain close to their owners, while others prefer a quiet room or an enclosed resting place.

Allow your pet to make that choice wherever it is safe to do so.

If your dog normally enjoys resting in a crate, this may provide a familiar retreat. However, don't suddenly introduce confinement or shut a frightened dog into a crate when they are not accustomed to it.

Cats may prefer elevated resting areas, enclosed beds or hiding places. Allow them access without repeatedly checking or disturbing them.

Background sound

Predictable background sound can help reduce the contrast between a quiet home and sudden noises outside.

Calm music, familiar background sounds or dedicated dog relaxation radio may be useful.

Be cautious about leaving television programmes, ordinary radio broadcasts or autoplay running. These can unexpectedly contain shouting, explosions, fireworks or other sudden loud noises.

A familiar, consistent background sound is generally preferable to something unpredictable.

3. Your Behaviour Matters

Your pet may look towards you when something unexpected happens.

Remain calm and behave as normally as possible.

If your dog or cat looks towards you after hearing a noise, use your normal, calm and reassuring voice.

Avoid hovering over them, repeatedly checking their reaction or behaving as though something alarming is about to happen.

There is no need to use anxious whispering or exaggerated reassurance.

Equally, you don't need to ignore a frightened pet. If they approach you for comfort, allow them to remain close and offer calm reassurance.

If they prefer to move away, let them do so.

The aim is to provide a familiar, reassuring presence without adding to the excitement or disturbance.

A useful principle: Be available to your pet, but allow them to decide how much interaction they want.

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4. Helping Your Pet Become Accustomed to Firework Sounds

One of the most useful ways to prepare for fireworks is to introduce recorded firework sounds gradually, well before a display is expected. This process is commonly called *sound desensitisation*.

The aim is to help your pet become accustomed to hearing the sounds without becoming worried or frightened.

It is not about making them endure something they find frightening.

Starting the process

Choose a time when your pet is relaxed and the household is reasonably quiet.

Play a recording of fireworks at a very low volume.

Don't direct the speaker towards your pet or position it immediately beside them.

Carry on with your normal activities rather than sitting and watching closely for a reaction. At first, an ear twitch may be about the most response you see.

If your pet startles, becomes unusually alert, gets up, stops what they are doing or shows signs of concern, the sound may already be too loud. Turn it off immediately if your dog or cat is worried or distressed.

Progress gradually

Once your pet is completely comfortable at one volume, increase it only slightly.

Don't increase the volume simply because a certain amount of time has passed.

Your pet's response should determine when you progress. If they become concerned, return to the previous comfortable level.

Several short, successful sessions over time are much more useful than one long session in which the volume continually increases.

Sound desensitisation may take several weeks or longer. Begin as early as possible and don't rush.

Introducing sounds from different locations

Once your pet is consistently comfortable with the recording, you can gradually vary where the sound comes from.

For example, play it quietly from another room rather than always using the same speaker in the same location.

This can help your pet become accustomed to hearing recorded sounds from different parts of the home.

Keep the volume low when changing locations. A sound that is comfortable in one situation may cause concern when it comes from somewhere unexpected.

Don't change the location and increase the volume at the same time.

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Praise and interaction

If your pet enjoys quiet praise, you can acknowledge relaxed behaviour without making a fuss.

However, there is no need to interrupt a dog that is sleeping or a cat that is resting comfortably.

The aim is for the recording to become an ordinary background sound rather than an event that requires special attention.

Important limitations

Recorded fireworks cannot reproduce every feature of a real display. Don't use the same recording over and over. Vary what you use.

Actual fireworks may involve vibration, flashes of light, unpredictable explosions and sounds arriving from different directions.

A pet that becomes comfortable with recordings may still be frightened by real fireworks.

Desensitisation is therefore one part of preparation, not a guarantee that your pet will remain comfortable during a display. A combination of methods might have the most successful outcome.

Remember: Start quietly. Progress slowly. Keep sessions short.

5. Additional Calming Support

Some pets may benefit from additional support alongside sensible preparation and environmental management.

Different products suit different animals, and no single product works for every pet.

Pressure or wrap-style garments



Some dogs appear more comfortable wearing a pressure or wrap-style garment, such as a Thundershirt™.

If you intend to use one, introduce it well before fireworks are expected.

Allow your dog to investigate the garment, then gradually become accustomed to wearing it for short periods while relaxed.

Check the fit and make sure your dog can move comfortably.

Don't suddenly put an unfamiliar garment onto a dog who is already frightened or distressed.

Watch your dog's response. If wearing the garment appears to cause discomfort or concern, remove it.

Calming sprays and plug-ins

Products such as Adaptil for dogs, Feliway for cats and Pet Remedy for dogs and cats may be considered as additional support. Pet remedy can be used for both cats and dogs. Ensure what you use is safe for the animal you intend it for.

Depending on the individual product, these may be available as sprays, plug-ins or other preparations. Use according to manufacturer's instructions.

Some sprays can be used on bedding, furniture or fabric items such as bandanas.

A treated bandana may allow a dog to move around the home while remaining close to a familiar scent and taking the potential calming benefits with them whilst they find somewhere they want to rest.

Always check the manufacturer's instructions before using any product.

Do not spray products directly onto your pet unless the manufacturer specifically states that this is safe. Follow any instructions about drying time, ventilation and where the product may be applied.

Calming products should not be regarded as a replacement for appropriate preparation or professional advice when a pet is experiencing significant fear.



6. What If Fireworks Start Unexpectedly?

Not every firework display is announced in advance. You may hear fireworks unexpectedly during an evening walk, while your cat is outside or when your pet is resting at home.

If this happens, concentrate on immediate safety and reducing distress rather than trying to begin a training programme.

If you are at home

Check that doors, windows and other exits are secure. Close curtains or blinds and reduce outside disturbances where possible.

Allow your pet to move to a familiar resting or hiding place.

Keep the household calm, but don't make it silent if that is not normal for your home.

Remain calm yourself and offer reassurance if your pet seeks it or calmly offer random words of praise here and there but do not keep bothering your pet.

Don't attempt to begin sound desensitisation while real fireworks are happening. A frightened pet is not in a suitable state to learn that the noise is harmless.

Use a calming product/spray as soon as possible.

If you are outside with your dog

Avoid remaining outside unnecessarily or attempting to make your dog stay near fireworks to become accustomed to them. Keep your dog securely attached to their lead and move away from the noise towards a safer, quieter location.

A frightened dog may behave very differently from normal, including attempting to escape. Ensure you have safe control of your dog. Get back to your vehicle if you are out somewhere further from home. If you have a crate in the vehicle, cover it as much as possible ensuring some ventilation and play a classical music channel.

Keep something to cover the dog (or the crate) and a suitable calming spray in your vehicle if you know your dog might be worried by fireworks or thunder.

Concentrate on getting home or reaching a safe location without adding further pressure.

If your cat is outside

If your cat is still outside when fireworks begin, avoid chasing or frightening them in an attempt to bring them indoors. Make sure they have an easy option to get into the home when possible.

You can try to tempt them with food, leave a door or window open if safe to do so and make something with a strong smell like fish. Fry some smelly food if safe.

Spray a suitable calming product somewhere they are likely to rest or hide once indoors.

Once indoors, allow them to settle somewhere familiar without unnecessary disturbance.

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7. Recognising When Your Pet Needs More Help

Pets vary enormously in their response to fireworks.

Some recover quickly after a sudden noise. Others remain unsettled for a considerable time or become increasingly frightened as fireworks continue.

Signs of distress may include trembling, panting, pacing, hiding, attempting to escape, unusually intense vigilance or difficulty settling.

Cats may become withdrawn, hide for prolonged periods or change their normal behaviour.

Consider the overall response of your individual pet rather than relying on one sign alone.

If your pet is showing severe distress, attempting to escape, risking injury, becoming increasingly frightened or you are concerned about the intensity of their reaction, speak to your veterinary surgeon.

Veterinary support may include discussing suitable treatment or medication for animals experiencing severe noise-related fear.

Where appropriate, your veterinary surgeon may also recommend additional behavioural support.

Don't wait until the next fireworks season if your pet is already experiencing significant distress.

Severe fear should not simply be pushed through in the hope that your pet will eventually become accustomed to it.

8. Planning for the Next Fireworks Season

Once fireworks have finished, think about what helped your pet and what could be improved.

Did they prefer a particular room or resting place?

Was background music useful?

Did they seek your company or prefer to remain somewhere quiet?

Were there particular noises or situations that caused a stronger reaction?

These observations can help you prepare more effectively next time and make a new plan or do more desensitising preparation.

If your pet struggled, consider discussing the problem with your veterinary surgeon well before the next expected fireworks period.

Gradual preparation is generally easier when you have time to work at your pet's pace rather than trying to make rapid changes shortly before an event.

Consider your pet’s general reactions to noise. If they are usually afraid of noise like thunder and this is not just a fireworks issue, use the desensitising and product plans to help with that as well.

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Final Reminder

Fireworks can be frightening, but thoughtful preparation can help reduce the difficulties many pets experience.

- Prepare early whenever possible.
- Keep your home secure and comfortable.
- Allow your pet to choose where they feel safest.
- Introduce recorded sounds very gradually.
- Remain calm and offer reassurance when needed.
- Consider additional calming support where appropriate.
- Seek veterinary advice if your pet is experiencing severe distress.

Above all, remember that your pet is an individual.

Start quietly. Progress slowly. Let your pet's response guide you.

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This course provides general information and guidance. Owners are responsible for their use of products and methods. Always seek appropriate professional or veterinary advice if concerned about their pet's health, welfare or behaviour.

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