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LONG-TERM HELP FOR
PET FIREWORK FEARS



How to desensitise your dog and cat to loud noises

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EVERYDAY NOISES CAN WORRY OUR PETS

Pets and firework fears

Every year, millions of pets are exposed to sudden, unexpected loud noises during the party or firework season, which can be unsettling for them.¹

Fireworks are the most common sound phobia,¹⁸ around 52% of dogs are at least partially affected by this fear^{5,30,31} and 34% of cats are reported to be afraid of fireworks in the UK.¹

Noise fears are a common behavioural problem in our pets^{3,13,22,23} that represent a significant welfare problem.^{4,7,8,11,12,26} Especially as 15% of dogs can take several days or longer to recover from firework noise and over 3% require weeks or months to recover.^{26,27}

Effective interventions to prevent and treat firework fears in pets is a wide concern and behavioural programmes like desensitisation, alongside pheromones are recommended to minimise adverse experiences.^{2,3,9,10,13,19,22,29}



Why should all owners consider preventing/reducing firework fears?

Even though pet owner awareness of firework fear issues seems to be increasing²⁶ reducing firework fears shouldn't just be for owners of dogs and cats that show obvious signs of sound sensitivity. There are many different levels of stress and all pets should be considered. As the distress of less overt responders or pets, such as most cats, can hide away and hence remain undetected. Especially as around 50% of the pet population are likely to suffer from firework-related distress.⁵

As fear of firework-related sounds can develop at any stage in an animal's life and cause behavioural and emotional problems, preventative help and longer-term support is a must for all pets.

Why should we focus on their fear of loud sounds?

- Fireworks are out of the blue and not part of our pet's routine, they don't know when or where they are coming from or what they are, so they do not feel in control.
- The fear of noises is from a normal adaptive response to a real threat, it is a behavioural and psychological survival instinct to react and seek shelter to avoid imminent danger.
- After the pet assesses the situation and determines that the danger is gone, they can return to their normal lives, however this isn't always the case.
- Pets can be fearful and have terribly negative reactions to fireworks or other loud noises. When their behaviour and psychological response is persistent it becomes a welfare concern.
- Ideally prevention of a sound fear should occur with a young pet during the socialisation phase to ensure they are able to cope appropriately with the loud noises as an adult.

Why are firework noises so much worse for pets?

Fireworks are very loud... especially for our pets, as cats and dogs have a super sensitive hearing. Pets have a much better hearing range than we do, e.g., what you hear at 20 feet, your dog can hear from 80 feet away.

As humans, we understand what a firework is and we know why they happen. But for our pets, fireworks are completely random and they don't know what they are, if they're a threat or where they are coming from. Their reaction is out of fear as the loud noises or lights could be a potential danger for them.

Cats are a small predator but they are also a prey species so need to be alert to signs of danger to keep themselves safe, therefore sudden displays from fireworks are frightening and overwhelming.



THE IMPACT OF LOUD NOISES ON OUR PETS

49% of dogs show fears associated with loud noises⁵



Signs to look out for stressed dogs are:

- * Trembling and shaking
- * Clinging to owners or seeking reassurance
- * Soliciting touch or other contact
- * Whining or barking excessively
- * Cowering & hiding behind furniture, in corners or in dark/small places
- * Trying to run away
- * Drooling
- * Unusual over-excitement
- * Digging
- * Excessively quiet
- * Increased alertness (hypervigilance)
- * Soiling the house (defecating or urinating)
- * Pacing and panting
- * Any change in your pet's normal behaviour
- * Refusing to eat/take treats
- * Unable to respond to toys or play opportunities
- * Facial tension
- * Wide eyes (whale eye)
- * Ears facing down or backwards
- * Lip licking
- * Yawning
- * Awkward stretching or shaking
- * Clinging to owners, seeking reassurance
- * Trying to run away



Signs to look out for stressed cats are:

- * Unusual over-excitement
- * Excessively quiet
- * Increased alertness (hypervigilance)
- * Soiling the house (defecate or urinate)
- * Any change in your cat's normal behaviour
- * Refusing to eat/take treats
- * Unable to respond to toys/play opportunities
- * Facial tension
- * Ears facing down or backwards
- * Awkward stretching or shaking



PLAN AHEAD. LONG-TERM HELP FOR YOUR PET WITH A DESENSITISATION PLAN

What is desensitisation?



Desensitisation is the gradual and controlled exposure to the feared stimulus/recordings to remove the manifestations of fearful behaviour.⁹ It involves repeated exposure to the feared recordings, but at such a low intensity that there isn't a stress response. Resulting in emotional state and behavioural changes.²⁵

Three stages of the desensitisation therapy

1. Patience

Desensitisation takes at least 8 weeks of daily sessions to get the best results. At the end of desensitisation, your pet's reaction to the noises you have worked on will be reduced.

2. Positivity

Ensure that your pet is less likely to relapse in the future by then associating the noises with something positive like tasty and enjoyable food or treats.

3. Persistence

For long term desensitisation, continue your pet's resilience to loud noises and maintain the association of sounds with positivity.



Fireworks / loud noises desensitisation therapy plan

- Just like people²¹, pets have fears and anxieties and the best thing to help your pet with loud sounds, is to carry out a desensitisation programme. Using sound recordings such as firework noises to create a fear response, is one of the first pet behaviour therapies ever used³² and the most common behavioural technique advised for treating pet noise fears.^{9,15,16,18,29}
- Desensitisation enables you to help your pet gradually learn a new set of associations with firework sounds. Which is relaxation, calmness, comfort, and willingness to ignore fireworks.
- It's a step-by-step 8-week training programme of desensitisation, most effective when pairing the noises with pheromones^{16,18} and rewards like food or play. This reduces stress by replacing the association with a positive one^{25,20} and significantly reduces firework fears long-term.^{6,15,16,18}
- With more extreme worries and fears this programme will take longer than 8 weeks and may require assistance from a clinical behaviourist or veterinary advice.
- It is an idea to keep a record of the progress, like a diary and the fear responses when they occur, as changes may be gradual, subtle or over a long period.

The trick is to stay consistent and keep it positive, never tell your pet off.^{17,24,29} It may take time, so patience is needed.



Where to find the right recordings

For fear of particular loud noises such as fireworks, you will need to play recordings of the fearful sounds as part of a desensitisation therapy. The 'Sounds Scary Programme' is ideal for this. It is available for free online, from the Dogs Trust website.

The 'Sounds Scary' recordings consist of 4 tracks for treating firework fear, which are labelled:

Track 1: Whistles and whooshes Track 2: Bangs and pops
Track 3: Full fireworks Track 4: Individual firework sounds

It is best to work through the firework tracks in order, this will make therapy faster and easier. However, if you are confident that your pet does not react to a certain noise then you can skip tracks.

Preparing



Choose a room where your pet feels safe and spends a lot of time relaxed and resting.



Leave the door open so that if your pet becomes stressed by the noises then they can leave.



You can do all of the desensitisation in this place to begin with, but when finished you should continue training in other places so that your pet becomes convinced that the noises are not a threat wherever they occur.

Golden rules

- Do not start the desensitisation programme if fireworks will be planned throughout 8 weeks of the desensitisation.
- Do not begin training when your pet is frightened, anxious or overly excited; for example after a visitor has arrived, or before going on a walk. The best time to do therapy is when your pet is already calm and relaxed, but not asleep.

How long does it take?

- Some pets are more fearful of loud noises than others and the length of therapy varies between individuals. More than 90% of dogs that have used 'Sounds Scary' showed a significant improvement after 8 weeks. However, some pets will take much longer. With more extreme fears this programme will take longer than 8 weeks and may require an accredited behaviourist.
- Most owners see an improvement in their dogs' firework fears following a desensitisation programme and are very satisfied with the treatment^{15,16,28} even up to 1 year later.¹⁶



Starting therapy

Start this process at least 6 months before the fireworks season and anytime after the fireworks season. As long as your pet is relaxed and not still fearful or affected by them.

The first time you play the sounds, ensure they are extremely quiet and at the lowest volume possible, even if you cannot hear it.

To avoid accidentally playing the sounds on a loud volume and scaring your pet, change volume settings before you even start or put earphones in so you can adjust it first before your pet can hear. Your pet should just about hear the sounds and it should not cause your pet to react.

You need to be careful and monitor their reaction.



Rewards/reactions

- Do not react to your pet's fear or try to soothe or calm your pet. Only show attention and affection when your pet has begun to relax. If your pet reacts then this is an indication you have tried to progress too quickly and need to go back a step and lower the volume.
- Be careful not to reward bad or fearful behaviours (i.e., don't reward when your pet vocalises or hides). This will avoid accidentally encouraging these behaviours to occur more. Instead, simply ignore.^{17, 24, 29}
- Distract with treats/ toys or anything else the pet finds rewarding. If your pet is not food motivated, you could use fuss as a reward or get out their favourite toy.
- If your pet is only play motivated, it is a good idea to try to get your pet playing games with you before you start the noises. Remain playful, to stop your pet from falling into a tense state.
- Be a good role model for your pet. Try to appear happy and unconcerned by the noises.
- If your pet is mildly fearful you could engage in an active game or if your pet will accept food or toys during these loud times, then give a Kong or food puzzle to keep them occupied.
- If your pet isn't too fearful to accept food or toys, then providing food puzzles will keep them occupied and create a positive association.



STEP BY STEP PROCESS

Use pheromones to speed up therapy and the positive association

For dogs, plug in an **ADAPTIL® Calm** Diffuser, **ADAPTIL®** is proven to reduce anxiety in dogs in a variety of contexts and is used during real firework events as it is scientifically proven to help the management of fear of fireworks.²⁸

It's proven to help when using a recording of fireworks, as well as help dogs remain calm to better train and learn. Plug in the room where you are carrying out the therapy, as near as possible to your dog's safe area or where your dog will rest during the training.

The combination of firework sounds and **ADAPTIL®** has the biggest effect in reducing the stressful response to noises by dogs, bigger than desensitisation to sounds alone. Overall reducing running, drooling, hiding, cowering, pacing, freezing, vocalising, panting, seeking owner, scanning, startling, shaking¹⁶, restlessness and destructive activity.¹⁸









For cats, provide a **FELIWAY® Optimum** Diffuser near to where your cat hides or their safe haven, at least a week in advance. To help comfort them and bring serenity whilst they hear the loud noises.

Leave diffuser switched on for 30 days.



To begin

1

-  1. Set the recording speaker system volume to 0.
-  2. Press play and wait for 15 seconds.
-  3. Slowly increase the volume until you see the first signs of noise recognition, such as twitch of your pet ears. Do not turn the volume up loud enough to cause fear, anxiety or agitation.
-  4. Once you have found this starting level, make a note of the volume setting so that you can reliably return to that volume when you repeat the exercise.
-  5. Play the sounds at this starting level for 5-10 minutes, 3-4 times each day.
-  6. Once your pet shows no reaction at all to the sounds played at this level, you can increase the volume slightly or increase until you see signs of recognition again.
-  7. Repeat steps 5 and 6, gradually increasing the sound volume and playing the sounds repeatedly until your pet shows no reaction.
-  8. Over a period of weeks, you will reach the stage where your pet will not react to the sound stimuli even when set at moderate to full volume. Every pet is different, and this may take several weeks.

TIP: If your pet reacts fearfully, act happy and relaxed so your pet can see that there is nothing to worry about. Resist temptation to reassure your pet, as it can be misinterpreted as you worried or rewarding them and increase negative feelings of the sounds.

Associate with positivity

2

In this stage of therapy, we want to teach your pet to associate the noises with a pleasant experience. At the end your pet will become excited and happy when you play the sounds even at a loud level.



1. Get ready to play one of the long tracks at the starting volume. Use the pause button to silently hold sounds.



2. Prepare your pet's favourite food treats, their meal or get a favourite toy ready for a game.



3. Press play, do not let your pet see what you have done (it is best to use a remote control).



4. As soon as you hear the noises put the activity feeder/treats/food down for your pet or start to play the game. Leave the sounds playing but remember, if your pet reacts fearfully to the noise, you must stop the sounds immediately and adjust the volume before trying again.



5. As soon as your pet finishes eating or when you end the game, you must stop the sounds.



6. Repeat this exercise daily (until your pet looks excited when the noises start).



7. Once you are confident that your pet has accepted the lowest level of sound and is happy when the sounds are playing, then the volume can be increased and the process repeated. Turn the volume up in the same way as before.



8. Eventually you should reach the point at which your pet associates the sound with food/play and responds to it with pleasurable anticipation every time your pet hears the noise.

Maintain

3

Carry on teaching your pet that noises are not scary through the desensitisation process and if they still need more desensitisation, resume playing the recorded scary noises. The sounds should always be associated with something that your pet enjoys, such as high value treats or a game.



1. Set the system to play track 4. After about 5 seconds you will hear three bleeps. As soon as you have heard these bleeps, press pause so it's ready to play.



2. Sit quietly for a few minutes, showing no interest in your pet at all, until your pet is calm.



3. Secretly press play (use a remote control if possible). Wait for the first firework sound.



4. Each time you hear a firework sound, start to act happy and excited. Immediately give your pet one of the food treats or start a very brief game (depending on pet's preference). Then stop and go back to being calm again, ready for the next sound.



5. React the same way each time you hear a sound. Stay calm and relaxed between the noises so that your pet notices that you only become fun and exciting when you hear a sound.



6. After several repetitions of this exercise, you can increase the volume carefully only if your pet is happy and relaxed.



7. Soon you should recognise happy anticipation each time your pet hears the sound. From now on you should act excited and give treats or play a game whenever you hear a real noise.



8. After therapy is complete you should still play the sounds regularly, especially in the period leading up to a party/firework season.



JUST GOT A PUPPY OR KITTEN?



What if my pet is still anxious?

If your pet is particularly worried, then you might find moving on from the early steps takes a lot longer, or you may even need to go back some steps.

If your pet is afraid with the noises at their lowest level, then try switching one speaker off, turning the bass down or even muffling the speakers with a cushion.

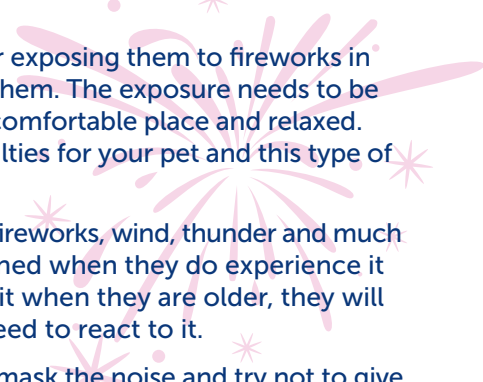
If your pet is still frightened, then you should contact your veterinary surgeon or a clinical animal behaviourist.¹²

Please consult your veterinarian if your pet has severe signs or any suggested interventions/advice is not working. Local clinical animal behaviourists can help guide what is best for you and your pet.



Train your pet as young as possible

- Training young pets or non-fearful adults to associate the noise with positive stimuli is highly effective in preventing later development of firework fears. It is particularly important to train as a puppy or kitten as the majority of pets develop a fear of fireworks in their first year.^{26,27}
- Start the training process as early as possible. (Use **ADAPTIL® Junior** Collar if training a puppy below 6 months as it is clinically proven to improve and aid quicker learning to cope with unknown or fearful situations).
- By following the same principle, you can gradually introduce them to other loud household sounds such as the washing machine and vacuum cleaner.
- Distract with toys and reward good and calm behaviour. Give them time and wait for your pet to settle down.
- Taking young dogs to firework displays or exposing them to fireworks in the garden is not a good way of training them. The exposure needs to be gradual and whilst the puppy is in a safe comfortable place and relaxed. This can cause life-long emotional difficulties for your pet and this type of exposure should be avoided.
- Exposing your pet positively to sounds of fireworks, wind, thunder and much more can ensure they will not be frightened when they do experience it or if it suddenly occurs. When they hear it when they are older, they will be more prepared, and they'll have no need to react to it.



- If there is a sudden episode of fireworks, mask the noise and try not to give them too much attention as you could accidentally be rewarding their fear. Ensure that they have their own space available, such as a super cosy safe haven, bed or crate. You can leave food puzzles, toys, or treats there so they know it is a comfortable safe place to be and cover it with a blanket.



WHAT TO DO IF FIREWORKS ARE GOING OFF

Keep your pet inside and safe

Create a safe place for your pet to retreat to

- Build a den/safety spot and leave it there at all times. Associate the safe area with positive experiences at all times before any firework events^{17,24,29}. If they retreat to this area, it's important they are left alone and not bothered.
- Wherever your pet spends most of their time or if they hide, place it where they go already.
- A bed or open crate is often an ideal comfy hiding place (unless it already has a negative association), cover the top with a sheet or blanket.
- Stock up on cardboard boxes if your cat likes to hide, ensure they have plenty of bolt holes as well as elevated perches at all times. Hiding is a natural coping strategy proven to help pets feel calm and safe.
- A pile of bedding or your old clothes can help some pets feel super cosy as they might like to dig into it and hide underneath.
- Regularly hide food treats and chews in the safe place to encourage your pet to go there and reinforce the positivity.
- Cats like to be in control of how they cope with stress. If your cat is hiding, leave them alone, don't try to tempt them out and don't pick them up or restrain them, let them go to their safe place. Litter trays should be provided in the room with a cat's 'safe place'.
- Using **ADAPTIL**® Diffuser near your dog's den is proven to provide reassurance by releasing synthetic calming pheromones, or plug in **FELIWAY**® *Optimum* near your cat's retreat to provide serenity proven to reduce signs of stress and fears.

- If you know the fireworks are coming, walk your dog early in the light and avoid having them outside, even in your garden during the events. Also, close cat flaps to prevent your cat going out.
- Always make sure your pet is microchipped and details are up to date in case they get scared and run out of fear. This is a legal requirement for dogs but also make sure your dog has their collar and identification tag on, even if they're only going into the garden. If they panic and run this may help to be quickly reunited.
- Taking them out when there are fireworks around will only create stress and confusion.
- Do not leave your pet alone, just your presence and being nearby will be reassuring to them.
- Always keep your pet in a safe/secure area so they cannot bolt/escape after sudden noise.
- Take your dog out to go to the toilet some time before you expect the fireworks noises begin.



Mask the noise

- Closing curtains, windows, cat flaps, doors, and blinds will help your pet feel safe and secure and hide any flashes of light that they may associate with scary noises.
- Turn on the TV/radio to muffle out the sound.
- Play familiar music or rhythmic music with repetitive beats and low frequencies which help mask the noise. Reggae, drum and bass and classical have all been noted to help some dogs but see what works for your pet to mask the sounds of fireworks and to have a soothing effect. Only play if your pet is comfortable with it.^{17,24,29}

Food puzzles/activity feeders and toys

- Keep your pet amused and active. Kongs[®], toys, Lickimat, snuffle mats are all ways to keep your pet happy and busy. Designed to entertain them for a long period and tire them out. Plus, anything that encourages your pet to lick or chew is self-soothing for them.^{17,24,29}
- With Kongs[®] for your dog(s), you could put pet-friendly peanut butter, yoghurt or chicken stock at the bottom and freeze it. For your cat(s) some yummy treats to paw out or tinned fish at the bottom to lick out. An enticing way to encourage using both mental and physical energy.
- Hide treats in towels or snuffle mats around a room for your pet to explore and find them by using their nose.
- Chewing isn't only a good distraction, but it can help pets lower their anxieties or excitement (arousal). It's important for dogs to chew to have an outlet to reduce stress and to calm them.

ENCOURAGE RELAXATION

- Going on a slow dog walk and having lots of breaks or stops allows your dog to explore, smell the fascinating scent enriched environment and entertain themselves. There is so much to investigate, and you can encourage this by dropping their favourite toys or treats.
- You still can keep them busy, entertained and tire their brains out from inside too. Try to be creative and think of new ways to do this. If your pet loves being active indoors, chewing, playing, licking eating treats then it will also create a positive association. Also, these calming behaviours will naturally unease your pet.



Relaxation training

- Training animals to relax on cue is, a less common, recommended behaviour change tool.¹⁸
- Relaxation may be achieved by massage or long strokes. Creating a cue that leads to a calm state of mind and relaxation will help your pet to manage stressful events⁹.



Provide ADAPTIL® for your dog

- **ADAPTIL®** releases a synthetic version of the calming pheromone the mother dog provides to her puppies, which provides feelings of constant comfort, security and safety at home.
- Plug in where your dog spends most of their time and near their safe place, ideally a week before any firework event, or while you are training, so your dog can perceive **ADAPTIL®** and has a calm atmosphere.
- **ADAPTIL®** is clinically proven to reduce fearful behaviours associated with fear of fireworks by 93% such as trembling, hiding and whining and helps relaxation during fearful situations and significantly reduced fear and anxiety during thunder recordings.¹⁴



Provide a FELIWAY® Optimum Diffuser for your cat

- **FELIWAY® Optimum** contains the first ever synthetic pheromone complex, designed specifically to comfort cats and provide serenity to make them feel reassured.
- It is scientifically proven to calm cats better than ever and in more situations.
- Plug in where your cat spends most of their time and near their safe place, ideally a week before any firework event. To expose your cat to the pheromone complex before the event and create the calm atmosphere at home for your cat(s).



SUMMARY

Even though fireworks occur frequently every year there are management and preventative methods you can implement. The desensitisation programme is a must for you and your pet, to reduce their long-term fear of fireworks. If nothing is done, their fear only gets worse.

Building up tolerance to loud, unexpected noises takes time and effort but your patience will be rewarded with calmer pets come the firework season.



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Links:

De-sensitisation: <https://blog.adaptil.com/uk/following-desensitisation-and-counterconditioning> **On the night:** <https://blog.adaptil.com/uk/on-the-night-dogs> Use the 'Sounds scary' free download resource from **The Dogs Trust:** www.dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/dog-behaviour-health/sounds-scary-booklet-dogs-trust.pdf

Further information is available from Ceva Animal Health Ltd, Unit 3, Anglo Office Park,
White Lion Road, Amersham, Bucks, HP7 9FB

