

Thunder and Lightning, So Very Frightening!

How to help a dog with storm anxiety

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With spring and summer comes thunderstorm season in Maryland. Like some people, I enjoy watching and listening to Mother Nature's spectacular displays...flashes of lightening, wind howling, thunder booming. But most dogs find these weather events at least slightly anxiety-producing, if not totally terrifying!

Storm anxiety in dogs runs the gamut from mild uneasiness during a storm to severe phobia. For mild to moderate anxiety, there is much that you can do to help calm your dog and help him feel more secure. In more severe cases of storm anxiety, dogs are unable to control their fear and often panic, potentially causing physical damage to themselves and to property. This extreme level of anxiety should be considered a medical emergency, damaging to your dog's health and well-being. Consult your veterinarian if your dog's fear of storms is extreme and seek assistance from a qualified behavior professional who is experienced in behavior modification training with storm phobic dogs.

Here are 10 ways to help your storm-anxious dog:

Follow weather reports/live radar feeds: Be aware of any pending storms and take any precautions necessary to keep your dog as calm as possible.

Reduce or block the noise level: "White noise," such as running a fan or air conditioner may aid in blocking out some of the fear-producing noise. "Through a Dog's Ear" music, psycho-acoustically arranged to calm your dog, may also help in alleviating anxiety. Mutt Muffs are protective ear coverings for dogs that greatly reduce the loud booms of thunder...familiarize your dog with their use prior to a storm.

Increase vigorous exercise: Your dog should receive vigorous exercise daily and more so on a day when the fear-producing noise is likely to occur. Exercise will help to tire your dog, both mentally and physically, and may make him less responsive to the noise. In addition, exercise has the effect of increasing natural serotonin levels, which can act as a sedative.

Change environment: By changing the environment of the animal during the storm or noise, the anxiety level can be reduced. Changing the environment may reduce the volume level of the sound or help make the pet less aware of it. Make a "safe place" in your home for your dog to retreat to during storms. This could be a powder room, bathroom, closet or laundry room. Cover

any windows so there is no visual stimulation from the storm. Have a comfortable bed on the floor with soft towels or blankets to cover him if this seems to help. Plug in a D.A.P diffuser in the room (dog appeasing pheromone, brand names Comfort Zone or Adaptil). Begin to work with your dog on counterconditioning and desensitization in the safe room when there are no storms to help create a positive association with the room as a calm, safe place. Have him lie on his bed, talk to him calmly, gently pet him and feed him yummy treats (something special like chicken). Begin this process in the safe room at the first sign of a storm. Be sure to make this safe place available as a haven for your dog when you can't be at home and a storm is predicted.

Project a calm attitude: Dogs are very aware of the mental state of their owners. If you are worried or nervous, this will add to the pet's fear. Your pet will look to you for direction, so keep an "upbeat" and calm attitude. Reassure your frightened dog: Calmly reassuring your dog during a storm with your voice, petting or holding him may help him to relax. Don't worry about "reinforcing the fear"; soothing your dog with gentle words or touch does not make him more fearful or increase fear in the future.

Maintain good health and nutrition: Health problems may increase the stress level of dogs and increase their anxiety. For instance, a dog in pain because of hip dysplasia may be more irritable and prone to other behavior changes. Your dog will not feel his best on a less-than-optimal diet, making him more susceptible to the effects of stress.

Melatonin: Melatonin is a hormone that is very safe to use and may help relax your dog. It can be combined with other behavior modifying drugs as needed. When a storm is anticipated, administer 3-6 mg of Melatonin approximately one hour prior to the storm occurring (preferably prior to symptomatic behavior). Check with your veterinarian prior to administering melatonin to your dog.

ThunderShirt: The ThunderShirt may be worn on days when a thunderstorm is predicted. The compression of a tight-fitting garment may help your dog feel more calm and secure. It is important to familiarize your dog with wearing the ThunderShirt when there are no thunderstorms so that it will not become a predictor of what he fears (itself creating anxiety). Be sure to place ThunderShirt on your dog *before* the storm amps up.

Medication: Discuss drug therapy with your veterinarian to help in treating your dog's storm anxiety. Sileo is a medication often prescribed and used successfully with dogs suffering from storm anxiety. There are several other options available, and no individual drug, or particular dosage, helps every dog's anxiety – be prepared to work with your vet to find what works with your dog.

Professional help: Get help from a qualified behavior professional, experienced in working with dogs with storm anxiety, to assist in creating and implementing a comprehensive behavior modification program to address your dog's anxiety.