

# Does your pet fear fireworks?

As the nights start to draw in and the firework season approaches, it is worth remembering that while we step outside to enjoy spectacular firework displays, they can be the source of considerable anxiety for many of our four-legged friends. With Guy Fawkes Night, the Hindu festival of Diwali, not to mention an increasing trend for fireworks over Christmas and New Year, it can be a challenging time of year for many pets.



## What are the signs?

Not all pets are affected by fireworks but in those that are the signs are usually relatively easy to spot. Dogs may be seen trembling and shaking, becoming very clingy, hiding in corners or behind furniture, barking or howling, and in some cases even losing control of their bladder. Cats are usually much better at disguising signs of anxiety, but things to look out for include hiding behind furniture, trying to run away, meowing excessively and refusing to eat.

## How can pet owners help to reduce their pet's anxiety?

- Avoid leaving your pets alone – they will feel safer with you around.
- If your pet starts showing signs of anxiety, try to stay calm and act normally – this will let them know there is nothing to fear. Attempts to comfort your pet may well serve to reinforce their anxiety. Never punish an animal for acting fearfully as this confirms that there is something to be afraid of.
- Keep your cat or dog inside and keep all windows, doors and curtains closed. If you don't have heavy curtains then it can be helpful to keep the lights on so that the flashes from the fireworks going off are not enhanced. Equally it can be helpful to turn on the television or play some music to drown out some of the noise, but make sure that it is not so loud it becomes a source of fear in itself!
- Consider preparing a den for your dog or cat to hide in.

There are also a number of products and supplements available to help support pets affected by a fear of fireworks. Please seek advice from your vet as to the most suitable products for your pet.

- Diffusers are available for dogs and cats: these release odourless pheromones which help to provide a feeling of security and reduce stress.
- Non-prescription products: there are a number of supplements available containing chemicals that have a naturally calming effect on pets.
- If the problem is particularly severe or your pet does not respond to the measures described above, then in some cases prescription medications to treat anxiety may be prescribed by the vet. In some cases your vet may recommend that your pet is referred to a behaviourist for further treatment and advice.

While the advice above will reduce the level of fear and help your pet to cope with their anxiety during the firework season, it is also sensible to consider longer term measures to desensitise your pet to their underlying fear. This involves exposing your pet to a gradually increasing noise stimulus, which does not provoke anxiety, until a level is reached where the phobia is eliminated. There are desensitising CDs available which can be very successful if used correctly as part of a planned program over several months, but they do require dedicated and consistent use to be effective. If you know your pet has a fear of fireworks then it is too late to start a desensitisation program for this firework season, but please seek advice from your vet so that hopefully the 2016 firework season can be stress free for both you and your pet!