

South Coast Vet Care ~ Animal Matters

When Your Dog Is Afraid of Storms

What to do if you have a dog with storm phobia.

WebMD Archive

It can be heartbreaking to watch: Even before the first clap of thunder, otherwise well-behaved [dogs](#) begin to pace, pant, cling to their owners, hide in the closet, or jam themselves behind the toilet. In severe cases, they'll claw through drywall, chew carpets, or break through windows in their escalating panic.

Thunderstorm phobia in dogs is real, not uncommon, and shouldn't be ignored, experts say.

"Most of the time they don't grow out of it on their own, and many will get worse with time if nothing is done," says Matt Peuser, DVM, a veterinarian at Olathe Animal Hospital in Kansas.

Why does storm phobia happen, and what can you do if your dog suffers from it?

Storm Phobia Triggers

Veterinarians don't know all the triggers but suspect the dogs are set off by some combination of wind, thunder, lightning, barometric pressure changes, static electricity, and low-frequency rumbles preceding a storm that humans can't hear. According to one theory, dogs experience painful shocks from static buildup before the storm.

The [anxiety](#) often gets worse throughout the season as storms become more frequent.

Dogs often start having storm-related panic attacks seemingly out of nowhere, says Barbara L. Sherman, PhD, DVM, associate professor of veterinary behavior at North Carolina State University College of Veterinary Medicine and a past president of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists.

"Owners come in and say, 'He wasn't like this last year,'" Sherman tells WebMD. "It's really heart wrenching to see these dogs that are usually calm companions become severely affected by thunderstorms."

Herding breeds, such as border collies, may be predisposed to the problem, according to an Internet survey by Tufts University researchers. Dogs with other fearful behaviors, such as separation anxiety, also seem more prone to panic.

Some dogs with storm phobia are also frightened of other loud noises, such as fireworks or gunshots, but others are only afraid of storms.

What to do? There's no easy fix, and unless your dog is only mildly affected, it can be difficult to treat, vets say. But there are lots of tools to reduce your dog's distress during storm season:

1. Reward calm behavior year-round.

Many owners make the mistake of trying to console and pet a fearful dog that's whimpering or climbing on them, but that just encourages the panicky behavior, Sherman says.

"We absolutely don't want owners to scold their dog, but we don't want them to reward the dog for being clingy because that will increase the clingy behavior," she says.

Instead, practice getting your dog to settle on command. Sherman advises clients to put a special "inside" leash on the dog and practice having the pet lie at their feet while praising the calm behavior.

"They should practice when there is no storm, so the dog learns the routine," she says. "When the storm comes up, then they put on the leash and say, 'Come on and lie down here,' and the dog still knows what to do."

During the storm, you can also try distracting the dog by putting some music on so the dog can't hear the storm as readily, offering its favorite toy, playing fetch, petting it, feeding [treats](#) as long as the dog remains calm, Peuser says,

"What you're trying to do is get them to forget about the storm and replace [the fear] with something positive," he says.

2. Give the dog a safe place where he can go in a storm.

That might be an open crate, a basement where the dog can't hear or see what's happening outside, an interior room or maybe a bathroom.

Let your dog decide: Notice where he goes during a storm, and if possible, allow access to it.

Be sure your dog can come and go freely, since some animals become more anxious if confined. Sherman treated one golden retriever that was confined to a garage and, in an attempt to escape during a storm, scratched through the drywall of the door leading to the house.

3. Consider a snug garment.

Snug-fitting shirts and wraps especially designed to calm anxious dogs are worth a try, says Sherman, who has consulted for Thundershirt, a so-called pressure garment that is said to have a calming effect similar to swaddling a baby. Some dogs also respond to wearing a metal fabric-lined cape marketed as the Storm Defender, which claims to protect dogs from static shocks.

So far, the benefits of these garments are anecdotal. A 2009 study found "there was a trend toward the Storm Defender performing better" than a placebo cape, but the results were statistically insignificant, said study author Nicole Cottam, MS, behavior service coordinator at Tufts University Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine. Tufts researchers are currently performing a study sponsored by the makers of Anxiety Wrap, another compression garment.

4. In the winter, desensitize your dog to the sounds of a storm.

Play a CD of thunder recordings at low enough levels that don't frighten your dog, while giving him treats or playing a game. Gradually increase the volume over the course of several months, stopping if your dog shows any signs of anxiety. The goal is to get your dog used to the sound of thunder, and associate it with good things, Peuser says. (Rosemary, I can email you a copy of a thunderstorm tape) (Trudi)

Experts caution that desensitization can have limited success in an actual storm because you can only recreate the noise, and not the other factors that may be bothering the dog, such as the static electricity or changes in barometric pressure.

5. Ask your veterinarian for advice.

The doctor may have more ideas for behavior modification and can assess whether medication may also be needed.

"Not every dog needs anti-anxiety medication, but dogs that are in a horrible state of high anxiety will really benefit," Sherman says. In severe cases, owners will keep their dogs on the medication for the whole season, while others give their dog medicine prior to a storm.

A 2003 study by veterinarians at the University of Georgia found that 30 out of 32 dogs with storm phobia showed significant improvement when given medication combined with behavior modification and desensitization.

"We have our best luck with a management plan that includes changing some features in the environment, applying some behavior modification techniques, and often some anti-anxiety medication," Sherman says. "Work with your veterinarian to come up with a treatment plan."