

THUNDERSTORMS



It is natural for dogs, cats and other animals to be frightened of certain sights, sounds, smells and situations. During the evolution of animals, a healthy fear of potentially 'nasty things' actually helped them to survive.

Dogs show stress in a variety of different ways from increased panting and salivating, pacing, rapid blinking, clingy or repetitive behaviours to more extreme vocalisations (whine, bark or howl), shake, hide, run or freeze. Generally they will seek comfort in an area or situation in which they feel secure.

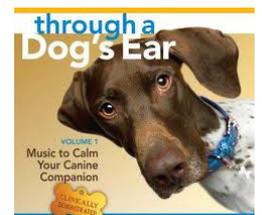
It is possible for many dogs to react to storms approaching before we are even aware that they are developing, as it is believed they are sensitive to changes in air pressure that precede a storm. Another idea is that they can be reactive to static electricity in the atmosphere.

If you know there are going to be loud noises or storms then it is important to:

1. Provide your dog with suitable comfort and security. A small safe space like a laundry or toilet is ideal. A crate in a garage or inside the house would be the next best alternative (see our handout on crate training). Whatever security zone you choose practice getting your dog to go in and relax there when there is no storm anticipated, and make sure that the area is dog proof and safe.
2. Ideally stay home with the dog or arrange for someone else to. That way they can be fully supervised when the storm hits. Make sure that this person can exhibit calm behaviour and body language during the storm; dogs are very sensitive to our body language and will pick up on our stress also.
3. Most importantly the area should be secure so they cannot escape if things get really scary. Escaping dogs can get lost or even hit by a car.
4. **REMEMBER:** Never put the dog in the area as a form of punishment or reprimand - they should only have a relaxed and positive association with this area.
5. Provide your dog with training that helps them to calm down, and be rewarded for calm relaxed behaviour. Teach your dog to seek his secure area prior to the start of a storm and reward them for staying there quietly. Only reward the dog for calm and relaxed behaviour. Ignore all other behaviours; this will help them to learn the appropriate response.



6. Make sure your dog is properly identified just in case the worst happens and the dog gets out. The RSPCA recommends a tag with your name, address and phone number. Put it on a secure collar: the collar should be firm, but not tight, nor too loose. The RSPCA also has a VIP tag which will help to reconnect you and your dog 7 days a week 24 hours a day. Micro chipping is also recommended, just in case the tag falls off or the dog loses the collar. Refer to our identifying your pet info sheet.
7. Lots of alternative therapies can aid in helping to create a calmer environment for your dog so the stress of a storm will be reduced.
 - Use calm gentle massage with long slow strokes to help your dog relax
 - Learn a technique like TTouch to help your dog cope
 - Putting a child's t-shirt on your dog prior to a storm can help have an effect similar to swaddling a child.
 - A Thundershirt can be also useful in reducing anxiety and fearfulness in dogs. Visit www.thundershirt.com for more information.
 - Use flower essences like rescue remedy or calm and clear to reduce stress levels. Calm Water can also be used effectively as a water substitute. (Available through World For Pets www.worldforpets.com.au)
 - Music can be used to provide a relaxing atmosphere, choose soothing classical music, or any of the baby soothing soundtracks. There are specific soundtracks designed to help reduce canine anxiety. Visit <http://throughadogsear.com/>
 - Essential oils like lavender can help reduce overall stress. Put a couple of drops on your dog's collar or bedding or use a diffuser in the area.
 - DAP (dog appeasing pheromone) can help reduce overall stress. (Available through vet clinics) and see www.dogappeasingpheromone.com for more details.
8. Restrict the flashes - during an electrical storm, close blinds and curtains and restrict access to windows so the dog won't be reactive to the flashes of lightening.
9. Desensitise your dog to noises: some dogs are just sensitive to any sudden or loud noises. It is possible to help reduce the anxiety with noises by purchasing (or recording) a CD or tape of storms and noises and starting by playing the recording on a barely audible setting in the dogs presence and rewarding the dog for ignoring the noise. Then over a period of weeks gradually increase the volume, all the time making sure the dog remains calm throughout. Keep increasing the volume until you are approximating a thunderstorm in your living room. Make sure there is no real thunderstorm during each session.
10. A wipe over with an antistatic cloth as the storm approaches may help reducing, any static build up in a dogs coat and increase their comfort during the storm.
11. In more severe cases it can be kinder to medicate, providing a sedative for the duration of the storm. There are also longer term medications available that when combined with behaviour modification techniques outlined above can be effective. (Refer to a qualified behavioural vet for these techniques).



70% of dogs who react to thunderstorms also react to other noises and have high incidence of some form of separation anxiety. If this is true in your case you may need to work on multiple issues to see a lasting benefit.

Training Puppies

The fear of thunder or noises can be greatly reduced in puppies by spending a little time with the pup when it experiences its first storm. Make sure the pup is calm first then reward them handsomely. Teach the puppy to ignore the weather and enjoy an appropriate game, settle down with a Kong or raw bone. Keep all human behaviour calm and relaxed.

If the puppy shows any reaction, make a tape of the storm noise and play it softly at first until the dog gets used to it. Gradually increase the volume over the next dozen or so exposures to the noise. Be relaxed yourself and reward the pup when it shows relaxed behaviour.



Brisbane early warning alert service

The Brisbane City Council have an early warning service, which allows residents in the Brisbane City Council local government area to register for severe and urgent weather alerts via email, SMS or home phone. See <http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/community/community-safety/disasters-and-emergencies/severe-weather-alerts/index.htm>

If you would like further information about understanding your animal's behaviour, and encouraging a more harmonious relationship with your pet please contact RSPCA Animal Training Centre staff on (07) 3426 9928 during office hours.