



THE LABRADOR RESCUE TRUST

ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO NOISE PHOBIA IN DOGS

This Veterinary Help Sheet has been very kindly written by Robert White-Adams MRCVS, who regularly writes informative columns in The Trust's 'Labradors Forever' magazine

Firstly – it is important to realise that noise phobia is primarily a behavioural problem and has been well proven to be most successfully treated with behavioural modification therapy - I was fortunate to once work with Rachel Cantlon, a qualified veterinary nurse of many years experience, who is now pursuing further study of animal behaviour at Southampton University. Rachel has spent most of her clinical time at the Practice where we worked together advising clients on this topic – so I asked her to summarise her advice..... over to Rachel:

Each year fireworks seem to become not only more popular but also louder! Unfortunately for too many of our pets they are a noisy, frightening experience that can lead to a severe noise phobia. Basic therapy for the problem is easy to do at home – and can be broken down into a list of “Dos” and “Don’ts” which will hopefully make fireworks a less stressful experience for you and your dog..

Dos:

- *Keep your dog indoors from dusk onwards on nights when fireworks are likely. Never walk your dog while fireworks are being let off.*
- *Cover all windows and doors to reduce noise and flashes leaking in. Put familiar toys and objects in the room.*
- *Allow your dog refuge in a quiet area (such as a bedded corner or under the table). Do not try to tempt your dog out as this just causes more stress.*
- *Play music at a moderate volume – preferably music with a constant and distracting bass or beat.*
- *Ignore the noises and flashes yourself.*

Don'ts:

- *Don't punish your dog for being scared - this just adds to their anxiety – and your actions just confirm there is something of which to be afraid.*
- *Equally – do not praise your dog for their behaviour –it merely encourages, supports and endorses feelings of anxiety. Saying “Good Boy” (or similar) actually sends your dog the confused message “you are afraid and scared and that is good – carry on!”.*
- *Do not fuss or try to reassure your dog when he is scared/anxious – this also rewards and encourages the anxious behaviour. Instead, try to distract your dog by encouraging play. If this fails then try to ignore your dog during anxious episodes.*



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- *Attention, praise and reassurance should only be used to reward non-anxious, calm behaviour.*

The effectiveness of Rachel's home therapy advice can be improved with some veterinary treatments – however, I cannot over-emphasise that the most successful treatment for noise phobia is behavioural therapy – over-reliance on medical help is a pathway to failure.

1. Pheromone Therapy: D.A.P. (Dog Appeasing Pheromone) is available as a pheromone diffuser or direct spray used in dogs. DAP has been well studied and proven to aid noise phobia problems BUT only in conjunction with appropriate behavioural modification therapy. Ask your vet for further information (but if you use D.A.P. make sure you ask for a copy of the manufacturers extra leaflet that details the protocol you should use to get the most from the product).
2. Anti-anxiety medications: In serious cases of noise phobia in dogs the anxiety is so overwhelming that behavioural and pheromone therapy just doesn't get chance to work. We can use medications to block the physiological mechanisms of anxiety, which gives the other treatments and behavioural modifications, chance to have effect. In mild cases, a new(ish) drug called Zylkene is fully-licensed for use in dogs and can prove very effective whilst also having an excellent safety profile. For more severe cases, some vets use human anti-anxiety medications, but there are some concerns regarding their safety. In the most severe cases (where the anxiety leads to aggression or destructive problems) I have also used beta-blocker type medication to block the effects of adrenalin. However, these medications should only be used in the short term to help break the pattern of anxiety while pheromone and behaviour therapies have chance to work. Also, your vet will probably want to examine your dog and talk to you before they are prescribed.

A word about sedatives.....

Please please please do NOT ask your vet for sedation pills! Just think about this for a minute - sure- sedating your dog is a quick and easy solution to the problem - and because of that many vets are still happy to prescribe the pills - but I have two MAJOR problems with doing this. Firstly, imagine..... I want you to imagine you are scared of the dentist – I mean really scared – but I give you a sedative pill and then plomp you in the dentists chair while he revs up his drill – don't worry though – you will be conscious and aware of everything that is going on – but because of the sedation you are unable to speak, complain, resist.... or even move your head away – let alone get up and run. Tell me – what does that do to your mind? How much worse does it make your fear of dentists? Because that's what you do to your dog when you sedate him to stop anxious behaviour! Sounds horrible doesn't it!



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Secondly – as the years go by you will need bigger and bigger doses of sedation to knock your poor pooch out - this happens because the phobia gets worse (the dog remembers being scared AND helpless whilst the fireworks go off) and at the same time the body learns to metabolise sedatives quicker and quicker the more they are used. So soon you will be on pretty hefty doses. Thing is – your dog is also getting older and sedation is getting more risky. In human medicine sedatives are only used in medical or dental practices where trained staff have the facilities to sort you out if it all goes wrong. So why do we think it's safe to sedate your 10 year old dog with enough sedative to fell a small moorland pony.... and then leave him in your front room with no medical support equipment?! Sounds crazy doesn't it.... but come and see the queue outside my practice asking for the pills. (They don't get them though!)

And one final thing...

So hopefully – with the help of pheromones, behavioural modification therapy and possibly anti-anxiety medication if needed – we can get you through the noise phobia. SO START PREPARING NOW.

The MOST effective therapy for noise phobia is a technique of desensitisation using a special CD recording of various startling noises including fireworks. The technique relies on slow persistent repetition BUT if used in conjunction with behavioural and pheromone therapy it is proven to be very successful. In many cases a complete resolution/cure is achieved. Good luck.

The Trust wishes to extend their most grateful thanks to Bobby White-Adams for his invaluable contribution to our rescue work.

This help sheet has been written by Robert White-Adams MRCVS. Robert has extensive experience working in mixed and small animal veterinary practice and anything to do with Labradors. He got his first and now sadly missed TLRT dog in 2001. Robert opened his own veterinary practice in 2008 which welcomes all pets, but especially Labradors.

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These Information Sheets are intended to serve as a guideline to new homes and foster homes. They are the result of many years of experience from our helpers and we hope that they provide a useful insight. Please note that these are only guidelines and The Labrador Rescue Trust, its helpers and officers make clear that it is the responsibility of each home/foster home to recognise the needs of their dog and to react to those needs. The Trust, its helpers and officers cannot be held responsible for the behaviour of any individual dog.

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