

Thunderstorm Phobia in Dogs

For some of our canine friends, a thunderstorm can be a highly traumatic event. Dogs with thunderstorm phobia can engage in a variety of behaviors including:

- Hiding under beds or furniture, or in closets, bathrooms, etc. (typically small enclosed spaces)
- Intense barking, whining, and/or howling
- Pacing
- Drooling
- Sweaty Paws
- Trembling
- Destructive behavior located at exit points – gnawing at window sills or ripping drapes, chewing door frames, etc.
- Attempts to escape the house (breaking through windows)
- Aggression



Why do Dogs Fear Thunderstorms?

Scientists are not completely sure what the specific cause of thunderstorm phobia in dogs is. Some dogs may be reacting to the noise, others to the lightning, or a combination of both. Others theorize that dogs can sense changes in the air prior to the beginning of a storm and this can be disturbing to them. Some dogs with thunderstorm phobia only react to storms with thunder and/or lightning but are fine with just a regular rain storm.

The *Journal of the American Animal Hospital Association* printed a survey in 2001 of dog owners with thunder-phobic dogs and found some interesting results:

- Some breeds appear to be more prevalent among thunder-phobic dogs such as herding dogs and hounds.
- Rescued dogs had a higher incidence of thunder phobia than the rest of the dog population surveyed.

What to Do if You Have a Thunder Phobic Dog

Safety is a key concern with dogs who suffer from thunder phobia, as these dogs can easily injure themselves in attempts to escape the house or hide. They can also bolt from the house and run away because of their intense fear.

- There are anti-anxiety medications that you can discuss with your veterinarian that can be helpful with dogs with thunderstorm phobia.
- You can use behavior modification to do “systematic desensitization.” What this means is that you will slowly expose your dog to the stimulus they are afraid of in small amounts, and build this up over time until they are relaxed in the face of a full-fledged storm. For example, you can purchase recordings of thunderstorms and play them at a very low volume and rewarding your dog with treats, praise, etc. when they are calm. Overtime you can increase the level of volume until your dog is fine with the noise. Depending on the level of your dog’s fear, realize that this is a program that can take some time to have the desired end result, but if you are patient and calm with your dog you should see progress. Since this is a brief overview of the process, you should contact an experienced dog professional or a veterinary behaviorist to help you with the protocol.
- Some dogs seem to do better if they find a place in your house that they feel comfortable, and if this is the case, allow your dog to do this and see what you can do to increase their comfort. Some dogs seem to

find being in a bathroom or even in the bath tub comforting, possibly because the surface they are on cuts down on the electricity in the air. Other dogs appear to prefer being in a crate or in a closet or enclosed space. If this makes your dog comfortable and he is not hurting himself in any way, let him have his preferred space and continue to supervise him during the storm.

- Other dogs actually can become calmer when brought outside. If you do this though, be sure that you have a leash on your dog, proper ID, and are supervising him at all times.
- Trying to redirect your dog's focus can also work but you need to start working on this prior to a storm when your dog is calm. Try teaching your dog a trick or a behavior such as sit, down, etc. and then as the storm starts, see if you can get your dog to focus on performing this behavior. If you give a dog a mental "task" to focus on, this can help them to "tune out" the storm to some degree. You may need to use some particularly high value treats (like chicken or cheese) during the storm to keep your dog's attention.
- Using "natural" options such as Rescue Remedy, valerian and melatonin are reported to be useful by some owners, as well as using the Comfort Zone Dog Appeasing Pheromone diffusers, sprays and collars. Another option is the Anxiety Wrap, which is a sort of "dog coat" that holds your dog firmly inside and can cause some dogs to become calmer, somewhat similar to the idea behind "bundling" crying babies. Likewise the "Calming Cap" by Premier has been found to be helpful and works along the same concept as the "blindens" you see on horses.
- Another option is using gentle massage on your dog. Ttouch is a form of massage that can help to reduce stress. Stroking and brushing your dog gently can be helpful as well depending on the dog.
- The important thing to remember is to be gentle, calm and patient with your dog. Dogs who have thunderstorm phobia are not being "disobedient" – they are truly fearful and in a state of panic and are looking for your guidance to help them deal with this traumatic event.

Resources

- DAP with Comfort Zone at [/www.petcomfortzone.com](http://www.petcomfortzone.com)
- Rescue Remedy at www.bachflower.com
- Anxiety Wrap at www.anxietywrap.com
- Calming Cap at www.premier.com/View.aspx?page=dogs/products/behavior/other
- Thunderstorm DVDs at www.legacycanine.com/store/index.html
- Ttouch at www.ttouch.com
- *Help for Your Fearful Dog* book at www.phantompub.com

For more information on the Association of Pet Dog Trainers,
visit our Web site at www.apdt.com or call 1-800-PET-DOGS (738-3647) or email information@apdt.com.