

***Ask the Vet:* Storm-Phobic Pets Can Be Calmed**

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Ah, Spring! New growth in the world, the pleasant songs of birds, the melodious rumbles of those lovely thunderstorms and cracks of lightning. Unfortunately not all pets appreciate storms, and some –especially dogs– sometimes develop phobias to storm events. Storm phobic dogs can display a range of signs from drooling, pacing and hiding, to trembling and staying close to their owner. Some severely affected dogs might develop destructive behaviors, vocalizing, inappropriate soiling, and even make attempts to escape in panic.

Normal dogs may show an enhanced alertness and mild anxiety to severe storms just like humans. But the storm phobic dog will become increasingly sensitized to just simple changes in wind and lighting conditions, or faint lightning and distant thunder inaudible to humans.

Help is available, and many dogs can be conditioned to tolerate storms. As with many phobias, improvement rather than a true cure should be sought. Identifying signs of storm phobia early may allow you to help your dog sooner and may prevent the behavior from getting worse.

It's best to seek guidance from your veterinarian or a certified animal behaviorist since every individual's situation is different and requires a tailored plan. Behavior modification techniques constantly need adjustment based on an individual's progress and the intensity of the phobia.

Classic behavior training uses relaxation techniques, desensitization, and counter-conditioning (redirecting dog's attention). For these techniques it is best to start by introducing some relaxation training, ideally started in a non-storm season. Relaxation techniques may involve training your dog to settle or relax in its own bed or comfort area through reward-based training. Helping your dog to learn to relax some during a storm is the initial goal. Over time significant improvement can potentially be achieved by using the right techniques and consistency.

Understandably, waiting for a time without storms to begin training may not be possible. Perhaps you missed or did not understand the early signs of the phobia. Applying behavior modification techniques to guide your dog to choose more desirable behaviors is easiest and most effective when starting early. This is true of all unwanted behaviors, from storms to biting to separation anxieties. Unfortunately, studies with dogs have shown that often multiple anxieties exist. For example, a significant number of dogs with noise phobias also have separation anxieties. This is why training techniques always need to be tailored to the individual pet and living situation.

In addition to training techniques, there are a couple of products that have been shown to be effective in calming. A dog appeasing pheromone, which is a synthetic hormone developed to match the pheromones released from a mother dog's mammary glands, helps to reduce some anxieties. This pheromone comes as a plug-in room diffuser, a collar, and a room spray treatment, has no reported side effects, and is safe to use along with medication. This pheromone works best when it is already active in the environment before the phobic event gets started. We use this and the feline equivalent in our veterinary hospital occasionally to help soothe our nervous patients, and consistently see decreased tenseness. Scientific studies have demonstrated this product to be beneficial in a variety of situations, including puppy socialization classes, fireworks, travel and trips away from home.

Many dog owners have seen good responses to anxiety wraps, or Thundershirts. These are wrap-around soft fabric jackets that provide gentle pressure and calming, much like a baby is comforted by the snug fit of a blanket. This type of product has been used with Autistic children and adults to help calm them during times of distress. There are several different types including wraps made for cats.

Pet owners often inquire about use of medicine to reduce their pet's anxiety driven behaviors. Medication is usually reserved for the most severe storm phobic situations. Behavior modification training is necessary to achieve any real learning. Use of medication offers only a temporary and inconsistent fix in addition to possible side effect risk.

While a variety of phobias can develop in the anxious dog, there are techniques and products available that may help you help your dog to cope with anxiety. Most importantly, any behavior modification technique takes time, effort, repetition and understanding. With concerted effort by the family, storm phobias can usually be managed more effectively, providing a better quality of life for both dog and people alike.