



## Helping Your Pet Through Storm Season

Many animals are afraid of sudden, loud, and unpredictable noises, such as thunderstorms and fireworks. Fear is a normal and learned response which can be unlearned with gradual and repeated exposure and conditioning. A phobia is an irrational and exaggerated response to something that may not actually cause harm to the individual. The sound of a lightning strike can illicit a fear response where an individual may get startled (I certainly jump sometimes!). However, if there is anxiety or fear when there is rain, darkening of clouds, or rustling of leaves or trees being blown around, these types of reactions are likely to be a phobia.

### Signs of a storm phobia

Some animals may show fear responses well before a storm. Dogs and cats can often sense a change in atmospheric pressure or humidity that normally precedes a storm. When animals are scared, you may notice them acting restlessly, hiding, shaking uncontrollably, vocalising (barking/howling, meowing), pacing, drooling, eyes wide open and wanting to be near to you for comfort. A phobia and separation anxiety can often co-exist. If an owner is present, a fear response may not be as pronounced than when a pet was on their own. In the more extreme cases, dogs and cats can be at risk of injury as they try to escape the fearful stimulus, and they can unintentionally hurt those in their surroundings or even damage property.



## **How to manage a pet with a storm phobia**

It is always important to discuss any concerns with your veterinarian to help you create a plan specific to your pet. Not all pets will require medication and for those that do, the aim of managing a storm phobia is to change the emotional state of the



animal from frightened and distressed to neutral and content. First of all, it is important that an animal behaving fearfully is never punished, as this will only heighten their distress and will not calm them. Create an environment that is safe and secure - that is, an environment where they are unable to dig or claw their way out, jump over/ through fences or break through glass doors to escape. This may mean keeping your pet in a well-ventilated room, switching lights on, or simply closing curtains and blinds to reduce/ block out flashes of light.

Something as simple as turning on the television or playing music that is loud or has white noise can be a good way to muffle any outside noise. Avoid praising and comforting your pet too much during a storm as this attention can unintentionally reward their fearful behaviour. A more effective way to avoid ignoring your pet and without rewarding any fearful or anxious behaviour is to distract your pet by playing with them or giving them chew toys or toys with food inside. At the same time, it is important that you try and ignore the fearful noises yourself.

## **Other ways to help your pet**

- Thunder jackets can be placed prior to a storm and work by applying pressure to pressure points on the body and can be successful in some cases.
- Pheromones are species-specific chemical substances that are derived from dogs or cats. There are pheromone analogues that have been synthesised and used for a variety of situations, with the aim of promoting a feeling of reassurance, relaxation and well-being. Pheromones are available as a diffuser (eg Adaptil for dogs and Feliway for cats) and as a collar.

- Zylkene, a milk protein derivative, may offer some relief in mild phobias/anxiety, provided long term daily intake has commenced at least one month prior to storm season. Zylkene is available over the counter and does not require a prescription. There is no sedation with zylkene and your dog or cat will remain alert but calm.
- For more severe cases of phobia/anxiety, your veterinarian can discuss whether a short acting or long term anxiolytic (must be trialled for at least 1-2 months prior to storm season to be effective) would be beneficial for your pet.

### **Vaxi Vet recommends**

Keeping your pet's microchip details up to date. If your pet gets lost and the microchip is scanned by a veterinarian or at a shelter, you are able to be reunited with your lost pet without a delay. Anytime you change your phone number or home address it is critical that you change these details on your pet's microchip form / online registration as well. It is not uncommon to find animals displaced after a storm. If you find a dog wandering the street on its own and if it is safe to do so, approach the "lost" dog and take them to your nearest vet to have their microchip scanned so that they can be reunited with their owner. Trying to work out if a cat is "lost" or just roaming isn't as straight forward - some cats refuse to wear collars, making them look homeless. If you notice any injuries or a cat in poor condition, this will often be a reason to take a "lost" cat to the vet to have them checked out and hopefully reunited with their family.

### **References and further reading**

Helping your dog with storm phobia: <https://www.vetwest.com.au/pet-library/helping-your-dog-with-storm-phobia>

Treating behavioural problems with pheromones: <https://www.vin.com/apputil/content/defaultadv1.aspx?pId=11349&id=5328242>

Noise and storm phobias and anxiety in dogs: <https://todaysveterinarypractice.com/noise-storm-phobias-anxiety-in-dogs/>