

What to Do Before Your Pet Hits This Seasonal Panic Button

Turns a happy pet into a terror-stricken coward in a shockingly short time. And it isn't just the loud noise. Many other components panic them also. Here are the eight signs your pet is panicked. Plus, your best go-to strategies, and the calming remedies you'll return to again and again.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Thunderstorm phobia causes extreme anxiety and discomfort for dogs, and is a serious stress-related health concern
- One of the first things you should do for a storm-phobic dog is create a safe spot he or she can use during thunderstorms
- It's also very important to implement behavioral interventions such as distraction, desensitization, and counterconditioning
- Talk to your integrative or holistic veterinarian about natural calming therapies

If your canine BFF has a storm phobia, it means he experiences an irrational and disproportionate response to normal stimuli, in this case, thunderstorms. Veterinary scientists haven't yet determined all the causes of phobias in dogs, but we do know nature (genetics) plays a role since, for example, herding breeds are predisposed to thunderstorm phobias.

Nurture — your dog's environment — also contributes to phobia creation.

Negative experiences are the triggers. Your dog may have direct personal experience with a stimulus, or exposure to others (pets or people) who are fearful of the stimulus. Either or both of these circumstances can create or reinforce a phobia in your pet.

In the case of thunderstorm phobias, it's important to realize that it's not just the loud clap of thunder that causes a fear response in dogs. Lightning, wind, rain, dark skies, changes in barometric pressure, and even odors can trigger a panicked reaction in vulnerable dogs.

Since our canine companions are naturally demonstrative and tend to look to their humans for help, a dog's storm phobia symptoms are usually quite obvious. Common signs of phobia-related stress include:

- Dilated pupils
- **Drooling**
- Rapid heartbeat
- Panting
- Pacing

- Trembling
- Potty accidents
- Destructive behavior

Fear of storms in dogs is a serious health concern. Research shows that in phobic dogs, plasma cortisol levels can jump over 200% from exposure to an audio recording of a storm. And even though we can't scientifically measure the emotions of sensitive pets during a thunderstorm, we can safely assume they feel fear and perhaps even terror.

Storm phobia causes extreme anxiety and discomfort not only for four-legged companions, but also for human family members who feel helpless to ease their pet's suffering. If your dog is afraid of storms, don't lose hope. There are things you can do to help your furry friend remain calm when the weather outside is anything but.

A Multimodal Approach to Help Storm-Phobic Dogs

1. **Create a safe spot** — This is a place in your home your dog can retreat to at the first sign of a storm (whether you're home or not). This spot should be located in an interior room with few or no windows, so she'll be shielded from hearing and seeing the worst of the storm.

You may want to place a crate in the safe room, along with bedding, water, treats, and a toy or two. Leave the lights on and consider playing calming music or leaving a TV on to muffle the sounds of the storm.

It's a good idea to spend time in the safe room with your dog when it's not storming outside. Play with her so she'll think of the spot as a happy place. For some dogs, having access to a safe spot at all times will be enough to help them weather the storm.

2. **Consider behavioral interventions** — Some dogs will require the help of a fear free **positive trainer** or **behaviorist** to overcome a thunderstorm phobia, especially if the situation is becoming progressively worse. However, you may be able to try some things on your own as well, but start as soon as you see any apprehension involving sounds or noises.

One option is distraction using a reward. A training session when the skies turn dark may be a perfect way to take your dog's mind off of the weather. Ask her to perform commands or tricks she knows and reward her for following your commands. Even a series of basic tasks, such as sits and downs, can be enough to take her mind off the weather outside.

You can also try distraction using a fun game, treat-release toy, or recreational bone to chew on. **Nose work** can also be effective.

Unfortunately, if your dog's thunderstorm phobia is intense, you may not be able to consistently soothe her with food rewards or other distractions. In this case, you may want to try desensitization, which involves exposing her to the stimuli in order to sort of "immunize" her to the sounds of thunderstorms.

You can use a CD with recorded storm sounds during times of the year when real storms are unlikely. Desensitization should be done in each room of the house because a new coping skill learned in the living room will probably be forgotten in the kitchen.

But keep in mind there are several aspects of storms (e.g., lightning, changes in barometric pressure, static electricity) that don't lend themselves to desensitization.

Counterconditioning is another option. It involves consistently and repeatedly pairing a negative trigger with a positive one until your dog makes a positive association. For example, each time your dog hears a thunderclap, offer her a treat. The goal is to condition her to associate a treat with the sound of thunder.

3. **Use natural anti-anxiety, calming remedies** — If you're in the midst of a thunderstorm watch or warning and you know your dog is going to panic, there are several options that may help her to calm down. Begin these interventions before the storm peaks:

- Ttouch is a specific massage technique that can help anxious pets. You can also consider trying Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) to help your four-legged companion.
- An anxiety wrap made from an ace bandage (or a commercially available coat for stress).
- Provide an Adaptil pheromone diffuser for your dog. Pheromones are chemical substances that can positively affect an animal's emotional state and behavior.

Products I use (always in conjunction with behavioral and environmental interventions) include Calm Shen, Hyland's Calms Forte, holy basil (Tulsi), valerian, L-theanine, rhodiola, bacopa, ashwagandha, GABA, 5-HTP and chamomile-based supplements. CBD can also be helpful. Consult your integrative veterinarian about which options are right for your pet.

Sources and References

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