

Can Strike Terror in the Heart of Your Pet – Especially if You Overlook This

Don't ignore this pet preparation essential just because it's the 'wrong' time of year. It can trigger your pet's cortisol levels to soar by more than 200%. Just a little pre-planning can keep your dog on a peaceful even keel. No medications needed. Ready, set and prepare.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If your pet has a thunderstorm phobia, create a safe spot in your home where she can retreat to
- Distraction, desensitization and counterconditioning may also help your pet to overcome thunderstorm phobia
- Create an emergency storm plan for your pets now, so you're ready in the event disaster strikes
- If you're evacuating your home, such as in the event of a hurricane, don't leave your pets behind. They likely won't be able to survive without you, or they may become lost and may not be there when you return
- You'll also want to prepare a pet emergency kit in a portable waterproof container

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published October 28, 2016.

Thunderstorms, with their loud claps of thunder, pelting rain, lightning and howling wind, can send even the calmest cat or dog straight into your lap for some comfort. But for dogs with thunderstorm phobias, the fear is taken to an entirely different level.

For these dogs, thunderstorms send them into a full-on panic. They may become destructive, engage in obsessive licking, pant, pace, tremble or have accidents in the house. Your pet may try to hide or run away, and there may be physical effects as well.

The stress response to a thunderstorm in a storm-phobic dog can increase cortisol levels more than 200%,¹ and your pet may experience dilated pupils, rapid heartbeat, trembling and drooling.

Some pet owners turn to antianxiety medications to soothe their dogs, but this has drawbacks. For starters, the medication may take hours to work, so it needs to be given well in advance.

This won't be of benefit if the storm is unexpected, and if the storm ends up passing you by, you'll have given your dog medication unnecessarily.

Further, in some areas thunderstorms can be quite common, which means you'd need to be giving your pet antianxiety medications often, with harmful side effects.

Create a Safe Spot for Your Pet

A more reliable option to drug treatment is creating a safe spot where your pet 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.

For a cat, this may be as simple as providing a cat bed in the corner of your closet (where your cat likes to go to hide). For a dog, you may want to place a crate in the safe room and add in blankets, water, treats and/or toys.

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 pet even when there's not a storm. Play a few games with your pet so she'll think of the space as a positive one. For some pets, having access to this safe spot at all times will be enough to help them weather the storm.

Behavioral Options for Dogs with Thunderstorm Phobia

Some dogs will require the help of a positive trainer or behaviorist to overcome a thunderstorm phobia, especially if it's becoming progressively worse instead of better. However, you may be able to try some behavioral interventions on your own as well.

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 your dog to perform commands or tricks she knows and reward her if she does it.

Even a series of basic tasks, such as sits and downs, can be enough to help your dog think about something else when otherwise she'd be panicking.

This activity distracts not only her but also you, in case you're tempted to inadvertently reinforce her phobic behavior by petting and soothing her while she's showing anxiety.

You can also try distraction using a fun game, treat-release toy or recreational bone to chew on. **Nose work** can also be effective. Use your dog's natural senses to divert his attention or have fun with Dr. Yin's Manners Minder.

Just keep in mind that if your dog's thunderstorm phobia is intense, you may not always be able to soothe her with food rewards or other distractions. In this case, you may want to try desensitization, which involves exposing your dog to the stimuli in order to try to desensitize your dog.

For thunderstorms, use a CD with recorded storm sounds during times of the year when real storms are few and far between. 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.

Counterconditioning is another option. It involves consistently and repeatedly pairing a negative trigger with a positive one until your pet 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.

Natural Antianxiety, Calming Remedies

If you're in the midst of a thunderstorm watch or warning and you know your dog is going to panic, here are several options that may help her to calm down:

- 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).
- Invest in a pheromone diffuser. Species-specific pheromones are chemical substances that can positively affect an animal's emotional state and behavior. There's the D.A.P. diffuser for dogs and Feliway for kitties.
- Consult a holistic veterinarian about homeopathic, TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) and Bach Flower Remedies that could be helpful in alleviating your pet's fear.

Some products you can use, always in conjunction with behavior modification, include Calm Shen, homeopathic aconitum or Hyland's Calms Forte, Bach Rescue Remedy, Spirit Essence Storm Soother or other similar remedies depending on the animal.

- Calming nutraceuticals and herbs that are helpful include holy basil (Tulsi), valerian, L-theanine, rhodiola, ashwagandha, GABA, 5-HTP and chamomile. Consult your holistic vet about which option is right for your pet.

A Storm Plan for Pets

While we're on the topic of storms, it's a good time to review your storm plan for your pets. If you don't yet have one, now's the time to get prepared. If you're evacuating your home, such as in the event of a hurricane, don't leave your pets behind. They likely won't be able to survive without you, or they may become lost and may not be there when you return.

If you'll be evacuating to a shelter, not all of them allow animals, so seek out animal-friendly public shelters, or speak with friends or family outside of your immediate area who you and your pets could stay with for a short time if necessary. It's also a good idea to keep a list of pet-friendly hotels in case you can't find a shelter that accepts animals. You can also talk with animal shelters and veterinarians to find out whether they will board pets in emergency situations.

You'll also want to prepare a pet emergency kit in a portable waterproof container. Let all members of your family know where your kit is stored and evaluate it every year to replace expired items.

At the very least, your kit should contain a supply of pet food, a pet safety harness, bottled water, medications, first-aid supplies, proof of ownership and recent medical records. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) also recommends including the following items:²

- Pet first-aid kit
- Three to seven days' worth of canned (pop-top) or dry food (be sure to rotate every two months)
- Disposable litter trays (aluminum roasting pans are perfect)
- Litter or paper toweling
- Liquid dish soap and disinfectant

- Disposable garbage bags for clean-up
- Pet feeding dishes
- Extra collar or harness as well as an extra leash
- Photocopies (or thumb drive) of medical records and a waterproof container with a two-week supply of any medicine your pet requires
- Bottled water, at least seven days' worth for each person and pet
- A traveling bag, crate or sturdy carrier, ideally one for each pet
- Flashlight
- Blanket (for scooping up a fearful pet)
- Recent photos of your pets (in case you are separated and need to make "Lost" posters)
- Especially for cats: Pillowcase or EvackSack, toys, scoopable litter
- Especially for dogs: Extra leash, toys and chew toys and a week's worth of cage liner

By taking the time to be prepared for inclement weather before it strikes, you could save your pet's life. This, combined with taking the steps necessary to relieve and/or support your pet's thunderstorm phobia, will help you and your pet survive and thrive in any type of weather forecast.

Sources and References

[CBC News August 16, 2016](#)

[CBS12 August 24, 2016](#)

¹ [Applied Animal Behaviour Science December 2005, Volume 95, Issues 3-4, Pages 153-168](#)

² [ASPCA.org Disaster Preparedness](#)
