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5 Ways to Keep Your Dog Calm During Fireworks or Thunderstorms

Canine noise phobias are common — and manageable

By Matt Alderton, AARP
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Fireworks on the Fourth of July fill most Americans with feelings of pride, patriotism and joy. But fireworks often fill dog owners with anxiety instead of awe, and dread instead of delight.

Neil Zevnik, 70, is one of those dog owners. A retired private chef who lives in Eustis, Florida, he has his heart break every year for Pearl, his 8-year-old, 120-pound rescue dog. Despite her massive size — she's half Labrador retriever, half Saint Bernard — she covers at every crack, pop, bang and boom.

"We experience major problems here because Floridians are very fond of their fireworks," explains Zevnik, who says Fourth of July fireworks in Central Florida typically begin several days before the holiday and often last for several days after. "Pearl gets terrified. Her eyes get very wide. She won't go more than 6 inches away from me. And if it gets really bad, she tries to climb up onto me — which isn't feasible at her size. ... She's just miserable."



The sound of fireworks terrifies Neil Zevnik's dog Pearl.

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Zevnik and Pearl aren't alone. Several studies have found that many dogs have a negative reaction to fireworks. A 2021 study by British dog welfare and training organization the Kennel Club found that as many as 80 percent of dogs are afraid of fireworks. The same study found that the number of dogs that go missing increases by 100 percent during fireworks season.

"It's very common," says veterinarian Alex Schechter, founder of Burrwood Veterinary in Royal Oak, Michigan. "My own dog, actually, is one that is scared of fireworks and thunder, so I deal with this constantly."

If your dog is scared of fireworks, you probably already know it. But stress might be more apparent in some dogs than others, according to celebrity dog trainer and Rover.com expert Nicole Ellis. Things to look for, she says, include anxious panting, lip-licking, pacing, whining and trying to escape through doors or windows.

"Shaking is one of the biggest signs," Ellis notes.

The reason for pets' stress is simple: sound. Although dogs are best known for their superior sense of smell, they also have super sensitive hearing. So when fireworks start popping, so do pups' ears.

Dogs "can hear sounds that are farther away — up to four times farther away than we can — but they also can sense higher-frequency sounds, which means they're receiving a lot more auditory stimulation with things like fireworks," says holistic veterinarian Lindsey Wendt, owner of Crystal Lotus Veterinary Care, a Los Angeles-based veterinary practice specializing in integrative medicine. "Plus, we all have to remember that dogs have no context for why these sounds are occurring."

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Unfortunately, you can't prevent city officials and neighbors from lighting up the sky. With the following strategies, however, you might be able to minimize the anxiety your dog feels when they do:

1. Retrain their brain

The most effective way to manage fear is to prevent it from developing in the first place, according to researcher Stefanie Riemer, who studied management and treatment methods dog owners use to combat firework phobias. Published in 2020, her research found that "counterconditioning" — replacing negative associations with positive ones — is the most effective strategy, reducing anxiety in more than two-thirds of dogs who receive it.

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"Start playing fireworks sounds in your home," says Ellis, who recommends using YouTube fireworks videos. "We can use that to our benefit by playing sounds on our TV, on our phone and in our car, just getting our dogs used to these random, sporadic boom sounds. If you give them some treats when they happen and throw them a party — make it something fun instead of something stressful — you can begin to change their associations."

2. Accessorize your pet

There are many wearable products that might help with noise phobias including pressure garments — straps, weighted jackets and anxiety vests that are claimed to soothe dogs by gently swaddling them. Pet owners can also find dog-specific head wraps, ear muffs and ear plugs that muffle loud noises.

What works for one dog may not work for another, according to Ellis, who says you can separate good products from gimmicks by looking for positive reviews from real people as well as scientific research to back up marketing claims.

And don't wait until the Fourth of July to remove the product from its packaging. "You need to get them used to it in advance, not during a time when they're stressed," Ellis says.

3. Try natural remedies

Calming dog treats are the only thing that has worked for Zevnik with Pearl. The active ingredients in his favorite are passion flower, valerian root, chamomile and hawthorn berry. Another variety that also works well for Pearl, he says, contains theanine and tryptophan.

"I give her a handful. It doesn't knock her out, but it does really calm her," Zevnik says. "Once they kick in, she stops panting, she's not so frantic about having to be right next to me and she will lay her head down and relax."

Wendt is fond of treats that contain adaptogens like lion's mane mushrooms and anti-inflammatories like turmeric. The former has been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety, she says, while the latter has been shown to reduce inflammation in the amygdala — the part of the brain that's responsible for fear.

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CBD also can be effective, according to Schechter, who echoes Ellis's recommendation to choose products that have scientific studies behind them. "CBD isn't regulated by the FDA yet, so not all products are equal," he cautions.

Pet owners should be sure to consult a veterinarian before trying any supplements, especially with a dog that is taking any medications.

4. Medicate if necessary

Medication can be an effective way to manage dogs' anxiety as a last resort. Medication on the drugs your vet might prescribe, Schechter and Wendt say, are Xanax, trazadone and gabapentin. There's even an FDA-approved drug, SILEO, that's designed explicitly for treating canine noise aversion.

Because your dog might respond well to one medication and poorly to another, it's important to be proactive, according to Schechter, who says you should consult with your vet as early as possible. If you wait until July 3 to ask for a prescription, you won't have time to test its efficacy, and your vet might not have the time — or inventory — to fill it.

While you're thinking ahead, make sure to update your dog's tags and microchip information, advises Schechter, who says more dogs go missing on the Fourth of July than any other day as startled pets seek to escape fireworks.

5. Create comfort and calm

If all else fails, the best thing you can do is make your dog comfortable. A few things that might help are:

- A safe space. If your dog is crate-trained, make sure you bring out their crate so they have a safe space to hide. If they aren't, "make a nice, quiet, small nook for them ... to curl up and feel secure and safe away from everything," Ellis advises.
- Exercise. [Exercising your dog](#) as much as possible earlier in the day could tire them out so they're less reactive to fireworks come nightfall, Wendt says.
- Background noise. Before the fireworks start, fill your home with ambient noise to help drown out external sounds, says Wendt, who suggests calming music — classical or reggae, for example — or white noise.

Don't forget snuggles, advises Zevnik, who says what Pearl wants most on the Fourth of July is extra attention from her dad. "Honestly, I tend to build my schedule around being at home with her," he says. "That's my strategy ... stay with her, be calm, feed her treats and give her constant reassurance and lots of love."


Matt Alderton is a contributing writer who specializes in health and wellness, travel and technology. His work has also appeared in USA Today, Forbes and The Washington Post.

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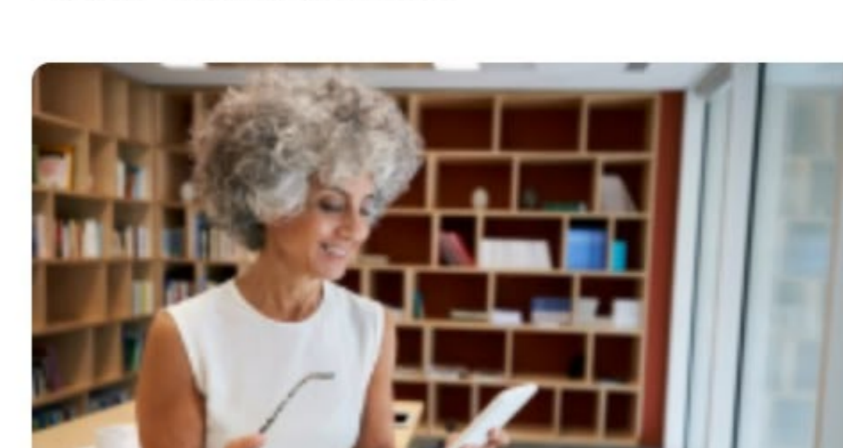
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