



FIREWORKS

Help for your dog





Fireworks have been used for thousands of years all over the world to help celebrations go with a bang. In the UK, we've traditionally let them off on November 5th to remind us what a near miss our politicians had at the hands of Mr Fawkes; and people are using them more and more to see in the New Year or to celebrate religious festivals like Diwali.

Not every creature in the world, though, appreciates fireworks. Your dog, for instance, might wonder, if he were able, why on earth we insist on scaring him silly with loud, unpredictable noises.

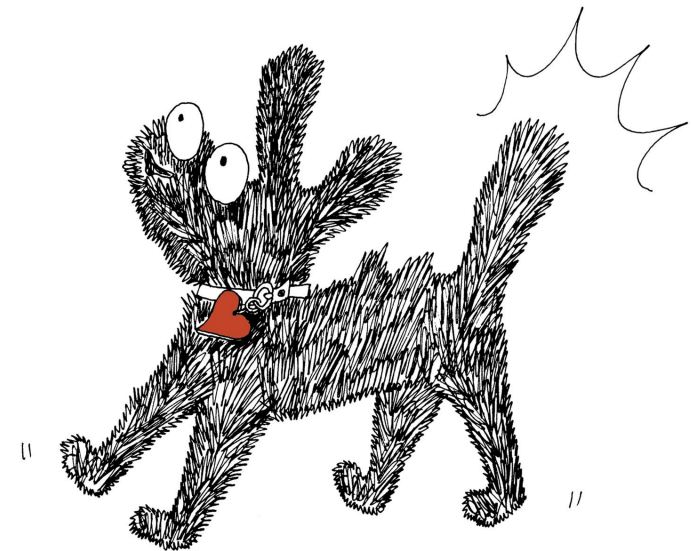
Whilst some dogs (and cats, and hamsters) are able to take these minor explosions in their stride, others can suffer serious psychological and physical damage. Dogs are especially vulnerable because of their very sensitive hearing and fireworks can cause them extreme distress.

Guide dogs and fireworks

As you can imagine, fireworks are a particular problem for guide dogs and their blind owners. Such a problem, in fact, that each year a number of guide dogs have to be retrained or even retired early because of the stress caused by fireworks. A dog can't guide its owner safely if it gets jumpy whenever a car backfires on the street or it hears a pneumatic drill.

Mhairi Thurston, a guide dog owner from Dundee, says, "Every autumn I worry that my dog Wanda is going to be traumatised by fireworks. They can be very loud where I live and although she has coped in previous years, she does get quite nervous. It's very nerve-wracking as I don't know what I'd do without her."

Following some tough campaigning by Guide Dogs and other charities, including the RSPCA and The Blue Cross, the Fireworks Act was passed into law in September 2003. This gives the government powers to introduce legislation to restrict the sale and use of fireworks. This is good news for us and for dogs. We'll be keeping a careful eye on the effectiveness of the new regulations and, if they don't improve the quality of life for guide dog owners and their dogs, we won't hesitate to take further action.



How to **help** your dog

Signs of stress

The first thing to do if you are concerned about your dog's reaction to fireworks is to watch him for signs of stress and anxiety. These can include:

- trembling
- restlessness
- destructiveness
- hiding
- pacing
- panting
- attention seeking
- shaking
- escape behaviour
- loss of house training
- whining
- barking

Any of these types of behaviour could indicate that your dog is developing a phobia towards noise. Occasionally, once a phobia begins to develop, your dog may begin to display similar symptoms towards other sudden noises, so it is very important to seek advice at the earliest opportunity.

Early experiences are very important for the development of puppies and if dogs are exposed to a variety of sights and sounds from an early age, they're less likely to have adverse reactions when they grow up. However, there's no guarantee that even the soundest of dogs won't display an unexpected reaction later in life – it only takes a single scary event to induce a fear response.

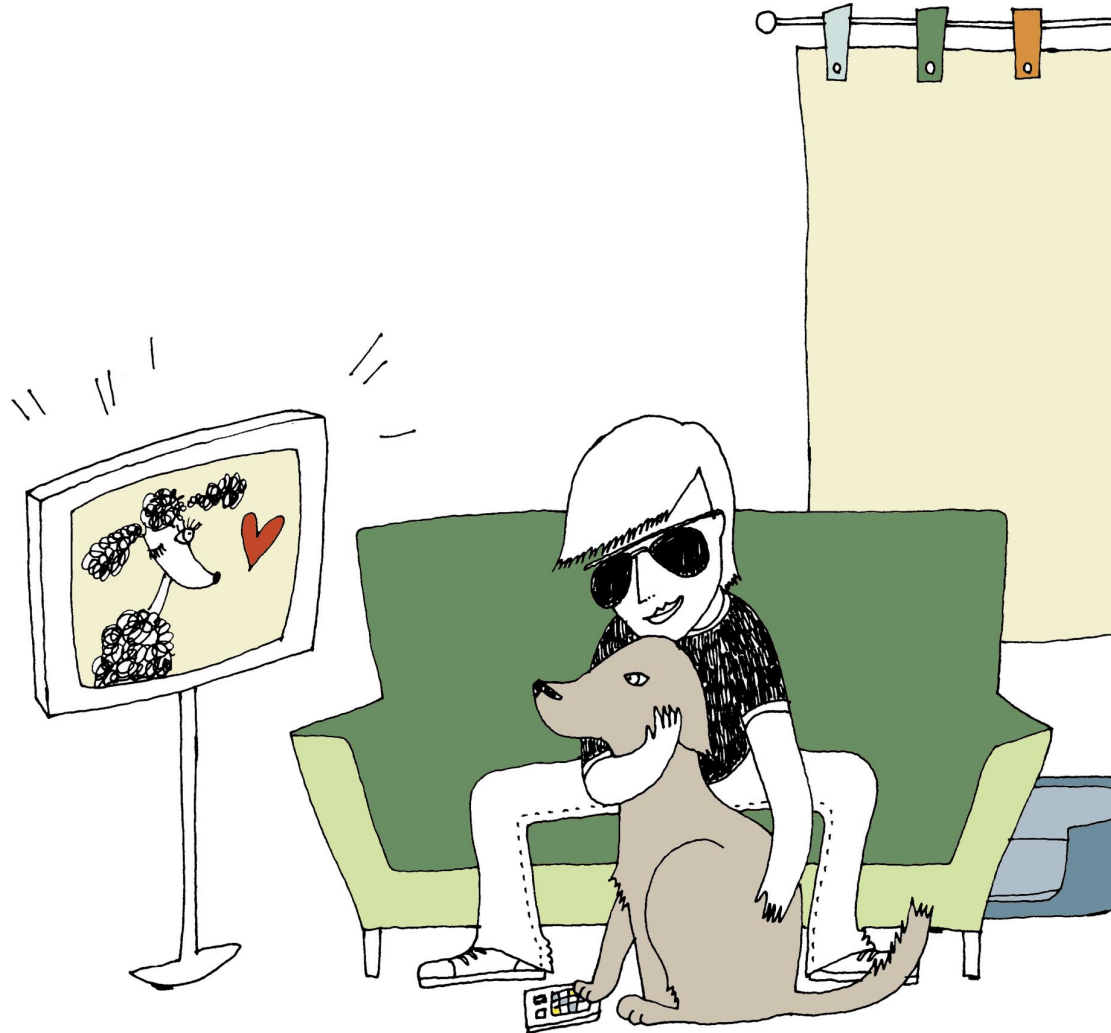


exposing young dogs to different sounds...

What **you** can do

When fireworks are expected, you can help your dog by:

- Making sure his environment is safe and that he cannot escape.
- Ensuring he always wear a collar and disk – just in case of a successful escape attempt.
- Trying to ignore any signs of restlessness and stress and rewarding any calm, relaxed behaviour.
- Preparing a “den” for him, away from windows.
- Covering a table with a blanket or placing his bed behind a sofa where he will feel safe, secure and comfortable.
- Closing the curtains to reduce the likelihood of flashes, and turning on the TV or radio.
- Feeding your dog before the noise starts – this should encourage him to rest.
- Not leaving him alone – dogs are pack animals and need the security and confidence provided by the presence of others.
- Finding him a friend! The companionship of a confident dog can give reassurance to a fearful one.
- Occupying him with food-filled toys or other fun activities.
- Choosing safe times for exercise and relief.
- Temporarily moving his sleeping area. Moving it closer to you can increase his confidence.
- Remaining calm and relaxed yourself (even if you’re frightened of fireworks too!).



What **not** to do

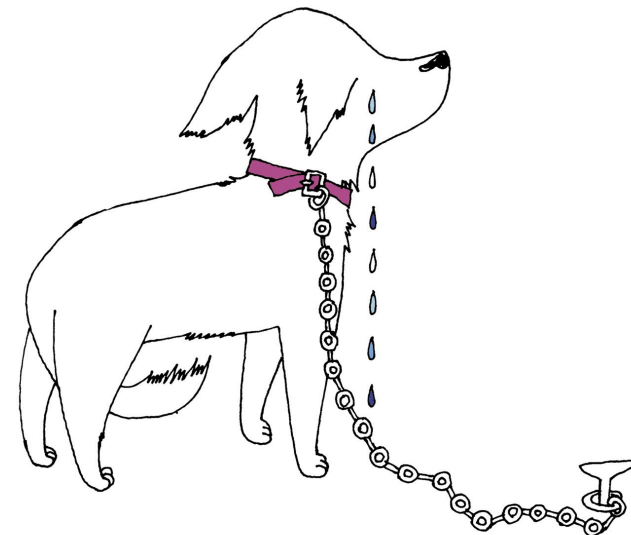
We would advise you never to:

- Let your dog go outside when fireworks are sounding, even if he shows no signs of stress.
- Exercise or walk him when fireworks are likely.
- Punish your dog for being frightened.
- Leave him alone during the firework period.
- Fuss or try and reassure your dog when he is frightened, as this rewards the fear behaviour and will encourage him to repeat it.
- Take your dog to a firework display.

Further help for you and your dog

If you take all these steps and your dog is still very distressed by firework noise, you may need some additional help from a specialist, such as a health advisor, dog trainer, behaviourist or vet.

There are also a number of products and resources on the market which can help. These include: desensitisation CDs (recordings of noises which enable the dog to get used to them in a safe environment), behaviour modification programmes, homeopathic remedies, pheromonotherapy, complementary therapies, and prescribed medication – supervised by a vet.



never leave him alone during the firework period...

Good luck!

The earlier in advance you begin your preparations, the more likely it is that your dog will be able to cope with the sound of fireworks. A vet can give you specific techniques to help him to adjust to sudden sounds in a safe environment, or refer you to a behaviourist.

If you are a guide dog owner, or a volunteer working with guide dogs or pups, and are having difficulties with your dog because of fireworks, please contact your local Guide Dogs staff.

To find out more about Guide Dogs and our work, or if you would like to help us, please call 08700 600 2323 or visit www.guidedogs.org.uk



Guide Dogs