

Fears of Loud Noises
Daniel Estep, Ph.D. and Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D.
www.AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com
Copyright ABA, Inc.

This is the season in which we see many dogs who are afraid of fireworks and thunderstorms. These are the common sounds of summertime in the Rockies, but they strike terror in the hearts of many dogs. Why certain dogs develop these fears is not well understood. Sometimes, the fear seems to develop quickly, as when it is the result of a frightening experience such as being caught outside during a storm. For others, the fear seems to develop slowly, with the dogs becoming a little more afraid each summer until the behavior really becomes a problem. The likelihood that a dog will develop a noise phobia probably is influenced by genetic factors as well.

Dogs may express their fears by hiding under things, shaking, attempting to get in their owners' laps, whining or barking, tearing up household items, housesoiling, pacing or escaping the house or yard by jumping, digging under or chewing through the fence. In extreme cases the dog seems to be in a blind panic and will even try to break through doors and windows, sometimes successfully, in her attempts to escape the noises and may injure herself while also damaging property.

Fearful dogs should never be punished for their behavior. Not only will this not lessen her fear, it may actually make her more afraid. Confining the dog on a chain or in a small area such as a crate or kennel often makes the problem worse as well. Many dogs seem to become even more panicky when confined.

Sometimes giving a dog a place to go where the sounds of thunder and fireworks are less intense such as a basement or interior room like a bathroom or closet may be helpful. Spending pleasant time in these areas playing with or feeding the dog can also make it more likely the dog will feel comfortable there. Don't force the dog to go into these areas however, as this may increase the fear. Closing windows in the house or turning on masking sounds such as the radio or television can also lessen the fearful reaction. Dogs should not be left outside, without at least giving them access to a garage, or storage building. Allowing them inside is better.

Behavior modification techniques such as counter conditioning and desensitization can often reduce the fears of noises, although they are time consuming and can take weeks or months to be successful. In the meantime, anti-anxiety medications prescribed by your veterinarian can reduce the dog's panic. Medication by itself however, does not solve the problem, and can only be a short-term management tool.