

PETS & THUNDERSTORMS

It's not uncommon for dogs and other animals to be frightened of thunder, fireworks and other loud sounds. As their sense of hearing is highly developed and superior to humans, they can hear sounds outside the normal spectrum and at higher frequencies, so it isn't hard to understand why dogs react the way they do when a storm approaches.

Most behaviour displayed by dogs before or during a thunderstorm is anxiety. Signs of this can include trying to escape by digging, chewing or climbing over fences, barking, crying or soiling the house.

THE WRONG APPROACH

Punishing your dog for its behaviour during storms will only make it more anxious. Try also not to console or calm your dog if it reacts badly to a storm as to the dog this is praise for acting frightened. When the next storm comes they may elevate their reaction and become progressively worse, making it more difficult to re-train the dog.

THE RIGHT APPROACH

Distracting the dog

This method works best when the dog is just beginning to get anxious when the owners are home. Encourage the dog into any activity that will capture its attention and distract it from behaving fearfully. Give lots of praise for paying attention to the activity, not the storm. It may not completely work every time, but it may delay the anxiety for longer.

Providing a safe place

Dogs who try to escape the yard during a storm are actually trying to escape to a place where the sounds of the thunderstorm are less intense. A secure area for the dog that is enclosed (like a den) and dark can serve as the dog's hideout whenever it feels fear.

Some dogs may automatically have an allocated area where they like to hide. This indicates that the dog feels secure there so, if possible, encourage the dog to go there during a thunderstorm.



If it's a new area, train the dog to go there by offering a treat or occasionally feed the dog in that area. The dog can then associate the area as a pleasant place to be. Encourage the dog to go to that area whenever a storm approaches, this is particularly useful if the dog is left at home alone.

Behaviour modification

Desensitisation is a gradual process involving getting the dog used to the offending sound, in this case thunder and lightning, until the dog no longer responds to it. The Dry Season is an ideal time to start desensitising your dog before the next Wet Season storms begin.

Start by playing a tape of thunder sounds and exposing these sounds to your dog at a low volume that doesn't initially frighten them. Occupy the dog with a treat or a game so that the dog ignores the sounds in the background.

Gradually increase the volume over time as you continue to offer the dog something pleasant in return. Through this process, the dog will come to associate pleasant experiences with the previously feared sound.



Other alternatives

In extreme circumstances, it may be necessary to medicate your dog during thunderstorms to keep it calm. Consult your local veterinarian for medication that may be available on the market.

Do not, under any circumstances, attempt to give your dog any human medications without talking to your vet first.

There may also be natural calming devices or medication as an alternative to using prescribed drug therapy. Once again, your vet can provide advise on the best approach to take depending on your dog.

If your dog strays during a thunderstorm As responsible dog owners may know, some dogs can perform amazing feats to escape when overcome by the adrenalin rush they feel along with fear.

Sometimes, no matter how secure the yard, dogs can rip off wire screens on doors, or damage or scale fences which at other times would appear impossible to climb.

Always ensure that your dog is wearing a collar with its current registration tag and ID tag in case the dog escapes and becomes lost. Report any lost or found dogs to the Council, RSPCA and all local vet hospitals.

More information

The City of Palmerston produces a range of information sheets to assist responsible dog ownership. These include information about our off-leash area at Marlow Lagoon Pet Park, dogs in thunderstorms, animal management bylaws, and toys for your dog.

The information sheets can be found in the Library, at the Council office, and online at www.palmerston.nt.gov.au in our publications section. For information, you can also call Ranger Services on 8935 9977.

This information is provided for advice only.

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