

South Federal Animal Hospital

Thunderstorm Phobia

Fear of thunderstorms is common in dogs, and tends to get worse as the dog ages. It is partly genetic. While some of the aspects of this problem remain a mystery, we know a lot that can make life easier for thunderstorm-phobic dogs and their families. Best of all, you may be able to help your dog avoid developing this fear in the first place.

Prevention and Precautions

Why do dogs fear thunderstorms? Too many dogs are left outdoors during storms, sometimes with no shelter at all. Anyone would be scared with good reason. Keep your dog inside during storms.

If you want to take your dog outdoors during a storm, do it safely. Some dogs do better when protected by raincoats and boots. Make the trip outside a fun adventure or calm occasion rather than a stressful experience. Special rewards for pottying outside in the rain are a good idea. Make storms occasion for special times with your dog to create positive associations. Games, treats and special activities are time well spent during storms.

Don't be tense during storms. Be upbeat with the dog, not impatient or pitying with your touch or your voice. The dog will pick up on your emotions and body language, so make them confident.

Dogs feel "rewarded" for fearful behavior if you pet and praise when the dog is behaving fearfully. Rewarding a behavior increases the likelihood of that behavior occurring more often, even when the individual is not conscious of being rewarded for it. Give rewards when the dog is behaving confidently, calmly, or happily. Work with your dog to develop ways to elicit these behaviors so that you can do so during the storms and then reward. This is powerful training that will help you and your dog in all aspects of life.

Be aware that this fear can be "contagious" from one dog to another. This makes it all the more important to handle both the fearful dog and a new dog carefully, so that you can improve how the dogs feel about storms rather than letting the fear get worse, or even feeding it by how you manage the dogs.

Causes and Triggers

Dogs react to a variety of things associated with storms, and it helps to know what these are for your dog. You may never know them all, but at least a general understanding will help you understand the extent of this fear.

The loud noise is scary to some dogs, and the dog can hear it at a much greater distance than humans can. The dog has early audio warning of an approaching storm, and most storm-phobic dogs eventually start reacting long before the sounds are loud.

Electricity in the air may be a major factor in dog storm phobia. Is there something unpleasant about this to the dog's sensations? Does it perhaps become even scarier to a dog who has been trained with an electronic collar, or frightened by a static shock in everyday life? We have a lot more questions about the effect of electricity on dogs than we have answers.

The smell of the air changes when a storm approaches, and of course, the keen nose of a dog detects this early. The air pressure changes, too, and a dog's ears are more sensitive to pressure changes than most people. In some cases, it might hurt.

The family may change routine when a storm is approaching. If the family is fearful, gets irritable with the dog, or treats the dog in some unpleasant manner during this time (puts the dog outside, for example), that could feed the dog's fear.

Anything that has become associated in the dog's experience with thunderstorms can become a trigger for fear. So, anytime one of these triggers happens is an opportunity for you to help your dog overcome fear.

For the More Severe Cases

Veterinarians, veterinary behavior specialists, and dog families deal with thunderstorm fears as this problem is so common. Different things seem to help different dogs. Beyond the above tactics, here are some things you may decide to try:

1. A quiet, dark, sheltered refuge. Your dog may find the preferred spot independently. Leaving you to simply make sure it stays consistently available to the dog. Chosen places include basements, bathrooms (sometimes in the bathtub), closets, and crates that are kept in secluded parts of the house.
2. If your dog becomes frantic and as a result might suffer injury or do damage during a storm, you may need to develop a good means of confining the dog. Sometimes a secluded crate works, if the dog has been conditioned to rest calmly in a crate.
3. The DAP Diffuser is showing some promising results in calming fearful dogs, and doesn't seem to have negative side effects, so consider setting one up in the area used by the dog.

4. **You and your veterinarian may decide to medicate your dog with an anti-anxiety drug for the entire storm season or year-round (these medications generally take a minimum of 4 weeks to start working), or a sedative during storms. Due to the unpredictability of storms, it may not be possible to administer a sedative when it's needed.**
5. **A behavior specialist can help you work out modification program to work on this problem. Such a program might include a tape of storm sound effects and training for your dog that you can use when the fears start. Learning more about communicating with your dog and modifying dog behavior in positive ways is always time well spent.**

Don't take thunderstorm phobia lightly, even if the problem seems minor in your dog. Handled badly by humans, it will get worse, and dogs have been known to jump through glass windows during storms. Some dogs will vomit when in storms. Many dogs have fled fenced yards. This is a major problem that calls for intelligent handling at the first sign. Treat storms as a routine part of life, nothing to fear, and even perhaps occasion for some special times. Do these things before your dog ever show signs of phobia, and you may never experience a serious case.