

Managing and Resolving Thunder Phobias
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A common behavior problem many dog owners encounter in the spring and summer is the dog who panics during thunderstorms. It is hard to imagine how terrified these poor dogs are when in their efforts to escape the storm, they sometimes end up injuring themselves. We've seen dogs who have cut their mouths, feet and legs by attempting to break through crates, doors or windows. One dog actually jumped out a second story window by breaking through the screen.

Dogs who are afraid of thunderstorms don't behave rationally, but are instead motivated by fear. They seem to be attempting to either escape the storm or to just get somewhere other than where they are.

In the process, they can do hundreds, and sometimes thousands of dollars of damage to an owner's house, belongings or property during a single storm. To prevent further damage, unfortunately many owners resort to further confinement of the dog in either a crate, basement or some other area of the house. This rarely does anything to calm the dog's fear; in fact the additional confinement often heightens the dog's panic. Self-injury and a worsening of the fear can often be the result.

As much as owners might wish for it, there is no 'magic bullet' when it comes to resolving thunderstorm phobias. A desensitization and counter conditioning program is usually required in order to change the dog's fearful reaction to at least being able to tolerate the storm without panicking.

Unfortunately, such procedures are significantly disrupted if the dog experiences a fearful episode during treatment. This means that the behavior modification program is best implemented during the 'off-season' – fall and winter – when storms usually do not occur.

Many repetitions of the desensitization sessions are required in order to change the dog's behavior. As many as 10 to 15 brief sessions everyday for several months may be necessary. Owners are likely to need the assistance of a qualified behavior consultant to help them implement an effective program.

In the meantime, owners of a thunderphobic dog can consult with their veterinarian for anti-anxiety medication to attempt to calm the dog on a short-term basis. A number of anti-anxiety drugs have been used to treat thunderphobias that do not result in sedative effects.

Drugs that just slightly or moderately sedate the dog without decreasing anxiety can actually make the dog worse, because he now feels even more out of control. It may not be safe to leave heavily sedated dogs home alone and unsupervised. Owners can also consider boarding or day-care for the dog on days storms are expected.