

NOISE PHOBIAS IN DOGS



Noise sensitivity is a fear response that occurs in dogs when they're exposed to certain noises such as sirens, smoke alarms, fireworks, kettle whistles, vacuum cleaners and thunder.

Noise sensitivity and phobias are medical conditions that can be managed by modifying the dog's behaviour and its environment. In severe cases it can be life threatening and require daily lifelong medication. This is similar to how diabetes can be treated with dietary changes and exercise but often requires medication to prevent the disease from being life threatening.

Physical signs of noise phobias

The amygdala is a part of the brain which acts as a 'danger centre' or alarm to promote survival in dangerous situations. During fear, this 'danger centre' is activated and the dog's body is triggered to respond the exact same way as our human bodies do, including:

- heart racing
- rapid shallow breathing
- sweaty paws
- tense muscles
- dilated pupils
- urination.



Behavioural signs of noise phobia

Not only are the physical signs evidence that a dog is suffering, but in some cases may lead to nuisance and noise complaints. In severe cases this behaviour can be life threatening. Signs include:

Escaping

Dogs try to escape by chewing through blinds, breaking through windows, scratching at doors and jumping off balconies. Escaping can be dangerous for both the dog, if it gets hit by a car, and other people, if the dog shows aggression.

Self-harming

Occurs through chronic lick lesions from over grooming and broken nails or teeth from attempts to escape. Just like humans, chronic stress can lead to immune compromise and premature death.

Vocalising

Dogs may howl, bark and whine.

Damaging

Dogs may cause damage to house and property and destroy furniture, shoes and other belongings.

Noise phobia is a medical condition

Noise phobia is not a training issue. It is not an obedience problem. It's a medical problem so it's vital to contact your veterinarian if you suspect your dog is suffering from noise distress or phobia so they can formulate an appropriate treatment plan.

Punishment will make the situation worse

It's important for owners to know that when an animal's 'danger centre' is activated the animal isn't thinking about what it's doing, but responding to the threat. When a dog with noise phobia hears the noise it will instantly react to it without thinking.

The dog isn't being naughty when it scratches the door, it isn't being vindictive when it chews shoes, it's simply responding to a perceived threat. Punishing the dog in any way like yelling at it or hitting it will only make the threat seem worse.



Treatment

Early intervention

An important way to try to decrease the risk of sensitivity spiraling into a phobia is to pick up on the subtle early signs of stress and act on them immediately.

These signs are often referred to as fiddle behaviours which are normal behaviours that occur out of context. Examples include licking lips when not hungry, yawning when not tired and shaking fur when not wet.

If an owner notices their dog performing these behaviours they should:

1. remove them from the noise
2. comfort them (remember they are not being naughty they are scared)
3. give them treats or toys.

Protection is better than the cure

The best way of protecting against noise phobia is to pair the noise with something pleasurable, that way the dog learns to predict something good is going to happen when the noise occurs!

The most critical time to form this positive association is during puppyhood, so remember that their first experiences of fireworks, vacuum cleaners and kettle whistles should be positive and fun.

When an animal experiences fear the 'danger centre' of its brain is activated. The more times the 'danger centre' turns on, the more likely it will switch on in response to smaller triggers. Unfortunately, the larger the response the harder it is to switch off the 'danger centre'. So initially the dog may pace and yawn when the smoke alarm goes off after burning some toast, the next time it may start to run around and pant, and then eventually, it may try to break through a window at the sight of the toaster being used.

Key points to remember:

1. avoid the noise where possible or block it out with music, shut the blinds and turn the lights on
2. provide a hiding spot for your dog
3. teach your dog calming and coping mechanisms
4. comfort your dog – remember this will not reward fear but rather alleviate it
5. provide treats or toys to change your dog's emotional state
6. contact your veterinarian for treatment advice and use medication when recommended.