

Thunderstorm Phobia

by Jennifer Ng, DVM

If your dog trembles and shakes, or tries to hide or get away during thunderstorms, you're not alone. Thunderstorm phobia is a common problem among dogs, and greyhounds are no exception. Some dogs show fairly mild anxiety during storms, but others have more extreme responses and get into a truly panicked state.

Emotional Management

Mild cases of storm phobia may be successfully managed with training and behavior modification. First, it is important to be aware that your reaction can have a big impact on the dog's emotional state and response to future storms. It is best to stay calm and relaxed yourself. If you act overly concerned, your dog may think you are afraid of the storm too and become even more anxious. Instead, stay calm, ignore your dog's nervous behavior, and go about your daily activities and interact normally with the dog as if nothing was happening.

Additional techniques that may help include providing background noise with a TV or radio, and closing curtains to muffle storm sounds and make lightning less visible. Some dogs find comfort in a safe place, such as a covered crate, inside a closet, or even in a bathroom or in a bathtub. If your hound is able to cope better in a certain location, make sure they can get there during storms. Other dogs do better if they can stay near or be in contact with you.

Natural/Holistic Treatment Options

There are a number of natural or alternative treatment options that can help with storm phobia. However, many of these are not backed by scientific evidence, and responses can be quite variable. It can take some trial-and-error to find one that works for your dog. When dealing with milder cases of anxiety, you have time to experiment and try to find something that helps.

Some of these natural options include pheromones that come in the form of collars (D.A.P.®, NurtureCALM 24/7®), or sprays and diffusers (D.A.P.®, Comfort Zone®). There are also a number of herbal and homeopathic remedies as well as natural supplements. While there are too many products to list, a few examples include Rescue® Remedy, HarmonEase®, NutriCalm by RxVitamins™, and Anxitane®. Additionally, some dogs have good results with a couple products called Thundershirt™ and Anxiety Wrap® which are essentially vests that use pressure to provide a calming effect, similar to swaddling a baby.

Behavior Modification

It is also possible to use training techniques to desensitize dogs to aspects of the storm that they find scary. Desensitization and counter-conditioning (DS&CC) are technical terms for gradually getting a dog accustomed to something they are afraid of and changing their association to a more positive one. Desensitization is best done during the off-season.

To plan a DS&CC protocol, you need to identify an artificial simulation of parts of the storm sequence that the dog reacts to. The most commonly used stimuli are audio CDs of rain or thunderstorms. To see if the dog responds to it, play the CD at normal volume and watch the dog's body language closely. You don't necessarily need to see a complete panic response like for a real storm - even minor signs of anxiety (ears going back, panting, trembling, looking away, yawning, licking lips) are enough to indicate the dog will benefit from work with that CD.

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Once you're ready to begin the behavior modification protocol, you want to start by playing the CD at a volume that's low enough that it doesn't elicit any response from the dog. Reward the dog for happy, relaxed body language with praise and treats. You can also work on some easy obedience commands that the dog knows (like sit or down) and again reward with treats/praise. But make sure the dog is calm and happy, or even excited, to be playing along. Some well-trained dogs can be nervous and scared but still obey commands.

Very gradually increase the volume of the rain or storm CD during multiple short sessions. The goal is to go slowly enough that you never elicit an anxious response. If you see any subtle signs of anxiety in the dog's body language, you've gone too fast. With time, you should get to the point where you can play the CD at normal, or louder than normal, volume, and the dog is relaxed.

Depending on the dog's response, a protocol might begin with a CD of just rain, then progress to CDs of mild storms, then stronger, more violent storms. Some dogs react to other aspects of the storm like lightning, or wind, and if you get creative, you can even attempt DS&CC to other stimuli if you can figure out a way to simulate it in a controlled way. For example, a strobe light can be used to simulate lightning. In the early stages of DS&CC, the strobe light can be used at the far end of the house away from the dog, then gradually get closer as the dog becomes desensitized to the flashing light. Obviously there are also components of storms, like barometric pressure and static electricity that we can't control and desensitize to. However, most dogs react to the noise of the storm and can benefit from DS&CC to audio CDs.

Medication for Severe Cases

For the severe cases, medication to help reduce panic and anxiety may be the best option for the dog's psychological well-being. Prescription medications usually have a stronger, and more consistent, effect than the natural supplements and remedies. However, medication should always be used in conjunction with behavior modification to help the dog cope with storms.

There are a number of anti-anxiety medications used in veterinary medicine. Some, like Valium and Xanax, provide immediate short-term anxiety relief and can be given as needed for storms. Others, like Prozac or Clonidine, need to be given daily over time, but can provide a 'background' anti-anxiety effect, which can be beneficial when you are not home to give one of the short-acting medications during a storm. There are also some medications newer to the veterinary field, like Trazodone and Clonidine, which may be helpful.

One medication that may be best to avoid is Acepromazine. Many vets still use it, but veterinary behaviorists no longer recommend it. Acepromazine is a sedative that does not truly provide anxiety relief and can even make dogs more sensitive to noises. While some dogs may seem to benefit from it, there is also a risk that it may make the behavior worse. There are many better drug options than Acepromazine for treating fears and anxieties.

Thunderstorm phobia is a problem that can be treated with a combination of behavior modification and medication. If your dog has this problem, talk to your vet about what your options are. Not all vets are experienced with behavioral medicine, though. So if your vet does not seem very helpful, you may need to ask for a referral to a veterinary behaviorist, or at least a regular vet who has a special interest in behavior.