



STORM PREPAREDNESS

How to Help Your Pet with Storm Anxiety/Phobia

Our pets' reactions to storms can range from disinterest to anxiety (whining, pacing) to outright panic (destructive behavior). As with any disturbing change in behavior, a basic veterinary check-up is always recommended to rule out any physical causes for your pet's reactions.

Even in its milder forms, however, storm anxiety should not be ignored. These behaviors tend to get worse over time if not addressed. Here are some general guidelines that may help:

- 1) **Avoid either rewarding or punishing your pet's behavior.** It is very important that you remain calm. Do not pet your dog or cat or tell them "it's okay". This type of response can actually increase your pet's anxiety. Talk to your pet normally or lie next to them without petting. This closeness allows the pet to relax with inadvertently rewarding the anxious behavior.

Some trainers recommend teaching your dog to "settle" on command. When there are no storms on the horizon, practice having the dog lie at your feet while praising calm behavior. When stormy weather arrives, your pet will understand what the command means and will find this obedience comforting.

- 2) **Create a safe haven** for your pet – a safe, familiar place where he can feel secure. This can be a crate covered with a blanket with the door left open. Cats often hide under furniture – you can clear a space underneath your bed and provide them with blankets to curl up and hide in. Many times pets feel safer in the bathroom - which is often the safest place to be in severe weather. It may help to reduce or block the noise level by playing a radio or television and closing drapes. Some owners use ear plugs or cotton balls in their pet's ears.
- 3) **Snug fitting shirts and wraps** designed to calm anxious dogs may be worth a try. At this point, there is no research evidence of these working, but many people claim that they have helped.
- 4) **Speak to your veterinarian about medications.** Your veterinarian can prescribe anti-anxiety or antidepressant drugs. Be sure to follow the instructions carefully. Never use drugs from your own medicine cabinet on your pets.

Often the best results come from combining all these techniques. Consider this advice, for example, from Dr. Karen L. Overall, writing in DVM Newsmagazine:

"Clients should have a benign, but clear, rule for how animals will be handled if they become upset or panicked. This will help the client, and it will really help the pet. For example, if a sudden storm surprises us in the night, one of us will take our storm phobic dogs from the room in which they sleep, get the (medication), give it immediately, and lead them to the spare bedroom where whomever gets up first will sleep with them. This room is better insulated from noise and storm pyrotechnics and is super-well air-conditioned to remove humidity. The process of removing the dogs from their room and giving the medication takes less than 5 minutes. Within minutes of that we are in bed with them, and last week, both were asleep five minutes later. That's not the medication, alone: that's the learning of the pattern that everything will be okay because it has become okay."

And what happens when an actual alert has been sounded?

The key to storm preparedness is advance planning. Think about the best location in your home to ride out a storm. Typically, this is on the lowest level (the basement if you have one), in a room with surrounding walls and no windows. For many folks, this is a bathroom. Plan how you could, on short notice, get all your family members and pets in this room quickly. This may mean assigning a family member to be responsible for each companion animal. Especially if you have multiple pets, you may want to move their crates or beds to this room at the first warning. Arrange the pet carriers so no two animals are face-to-face, if possible. Having a plan and sticking to it will allow you to react in the calm manner that your pets will find reassuring.