



1333 Plaza Blvd, Suite E, Central Point, OR 97502 \* [www.mountainviewvet.net](http://www.mountainviewvet.net)

## **Noise phobia**

*Fear of thunderstorms, thunderstorm phobia, fear of loud noises*

### **Affected Animals:**

Any breed of dog of either sex may be affected. In one report, the age at which dogs were presented for this problem ranged from one to 11 years. However, 78 percent of the cases presented were between the ages of one and five years.

### **Overview:**

A very common problem in dogs, noise phobia is an excessive fear of a sound that results in the dog attempting to avoid or escape from the sound. As a result of its phobia, a dog may injure itself and damage or destroy property. Sounds that noise-phobic dogs commonly fear are thunder, firecrackers and gunshots.

### **Clinical Signs:**

The most consistent signs seen with noise phobias are panting and trembling. Other fear-related behaviors that frequently occur include drooling, whining, house soiling, chewing, digging, pacing, hiding, and seeking constant contact with the owner. The intensity of the fear behaviors depends on the severity of the dog's phobia and the loudness of the sound.

### **Symptoms:**

See clinical signs.

### **Description:**

When a dog is afraid, it reacts by trying to escape, hiding, acting aggressively, or becoming immobile. Dogs with a particular phobia to noise usually try to escape or hide. In this process, they may injure themselves or damage property by digging and chewing. Dogs that succeed in escaping may run long distances and become lost. Some dogs have become stuck within their hiding places as a result of wedging themselves in so tightly.

Noise phobias range in severity from mild to severe. Dogs that are mildly afraid may only pace and pant. Dogs that are severely phobic literally panic. Such dogs have chewed through walls, ripped up furniture and automobile upholstery, and even jumped through second-story plate glass windows.

Dogs that are afraid of thunder often begin acting fearful before the owner is aware of the impending storm. Perhaps this is because the dog can hear the thunder sooner than the owner can or because it has learned to associate other weather changes, such as an overcast sky or rain, with the sound of thunder.

Dogs do not outgrow noise phobias; in fact, the phobia gets worse with time, with each

exposure to the sound leading to increasing fear. Additionally, the fear tends to progress so that it encompasses other similar sounds. For example, a dog that is initially afraid of gunshots may eventually become fearful of the sound of backfiring automobiles.

### **Diagnosis:**

Whenever there is a change in behavior, a dog should be seen by a veterinarian for a health check-up. Medical conditions such as endocrine disorders, pain, canine cognitive dysfunction, and certain medications may exaggerate a dog's fear. Once medical problems have been excluded as a cause of the dog's behavior, a diagnosis of noise phobia usually is easy. When fear occurs consistently in response to a particular sound, the diagnosis of a noise phobia can be assumed. The problem may be missed, however, in situations in which the dog hears a noise that the owner does not. In addition, because dogs are more fearful when they are alone than when they are with their owners, "sporadic" destructive behavior or house-soiling that occurs during the owners' absence may not be recognized as evidence of a noise phobia.

### **Prognosis:**

Noise phobias can be managed most successfully through a combination of behavior modification, environmental control, and medication. The prognosis depends on the severity and length of time the dog has had the noise phobia, as well as the amount of time the owner is able to devote to training and environmental management.

### **Transmission or Cause:**

There have been no studies to investigate the cause of noise phobias in dogs. However, studies of fear and clinical cases of noise phobias suggest a genetic predisposition.

In some instances, owners can identify a particular incident that appears to have triggered the onset of the dog's phobia, such as one particular severe storm that was very close to home and may have resulted in lightning striking a nearby tree. In other cases, the owners are not able to identify a particular event that triggered the fear; rather, they report that their dogs developed the fear gradually.

### **Treatment:**

Treating a noise phobia requires reducing a dog's fear. Punishment is both inhumane and ineffective. There are a number of different approaches for the treatment of noise phobia; unfortunately, none of them are consistently or completely effective. Treatment approaches include behavior modification, environmental controls, training aids, and drug therapy.

Behavior modification techniques use learning principles to teach the dog to stop being afraid of the phobic sounds. Desensitization and counter-conditioning are techniques that expose the dog to very low levels of the fear-evoking sound on a slowly increasing scale of intensity. The dog is rewarded when it does not react fearfully. Because treatment of thunder phobia with these techniques alone is rarely, if ever, successful, desensitization and counter-conditioning usually are used in conjunction with other methods of treatment.

Head halters, such as the Gentle Leader or the Snoot Loop, in combination with obedience commands such as "down-stay," may limit pacing and help reduce fear in some dogs. It may be possible to teach dogs with mild to moderate noise phobias to associate play with the fear-evoking sound by engaging the animal in a favorite type of

play each time the noise is heard.

There are a variety of methods that try to "insulate" the dog from the sound. Providing a crate that is covered with a heavy blanket and placed in a room that is away from windows is especially helpful for noise-phobic dogs that attempt to hide. Playing a recording of music that contains deep, percussive tones may mask the fear-evoking sound. Some dogs can actually be taught, using desensitization techniques, to wear earplugs.

Drug therapy almost always is included in the treatment of dogs with moderate to severe fears. Medication by itself, however, is much less effective than medication that is used in combination with behavioral training and environmental changes. A variety of drugs within several different classes have been prescribed. For mild to moderately fearful dogs, anti-anxiety drugs, such as alprazolam, marketed as Xanax, and buspirone, marketed as Buspar, and antidepressants such as amitriptyline, marketed as Elavil, have been relied upon the most. Major tranquilizers, such as acetylpromazine, marketed as Acepromazine, often are required to treat severe noise phobias. Recently, melatonin was reported to be effective in the treatment of one case of noise phobia. The decision to use drugs should be made on the advice of a veterinarian.

**Prevention:**

It is unknown whether noise phobias can be prevented through early training and management. In general, it is wise to expose a puppy in a positive and controlled way to a variety of stimuli and environments during its socialization period to increase the likelihood that the animal will be comfortable in a variety of situations when it is an adult.