



## Thunderstorm Phobia—some coping strategies

The most important thing to do for a dog with a fear of Thunderstorms is to provide a “Safe Place” for the dog to go during a storm. This place can be a place of the dog’s choosing, or one that you choose for them. Many times dogs choose the bathroom (preferably one with no windows). Many hide in the bathtub or shower stall, some behind the toilet. We know of one dog who curls up in a dog bed that is too small for her. Some dogs hide underneath furniture, such as a table or bed. Most of my dogs have learned to feel secure in their crates (they are crate trained separately from the storm so that they feel that it is their safe place in their daily lives). The one rule is that the dog needs to find a place separate from you—so that you aren’t dependant on providing the dog comfort during a storm. I want them to seek out their safe spot during a storm and find their own coping strategies without needing your comfort.

It is very important to **not** offer your dog lavish comfort during a t-storm. Attention and comfort only serves to reinforce their stress, and does nothing to help them learn to cope on their own. Our role during a t-storm is to guide them into choosing the correct behaviors during a storm, and giving them all the support that they need in order to be calm during a stressful event.

If you have a dog who is suddenly thunderstorm phobic and never has had the issue before, consult with your vet and be sure that they do a check for Tick Borne Illnesses. Having one of the tick borne illnesses can predispose them to being sensitive to a storm. Thunderstorm phobia tends to get worse as the dog gets older, so it is not unusual to notice that your dog becomes increasingly sensitive to them through time. It’s just a good idea to have your dog checked out at the vet if you experience any behavioral change. Once a medical cause is ruled out, you can start doing the behavioral work to overcome the problem.

I am a huge believer in using medication to try to alleviate their stress. Feel free to consult with your vet before trying any of the medications stated below. I highly recommend Melatonin (3 mg for all but the smallest or biggest of dogs). You can give it in the morning if a thunderstorm is predicted, and then again before the storm. If more support is needed, talk to your veterinarian about drug therapy for the phobia. Valium or Xanax can be used in combination with the Melatonin. Valium and Xanax do not last long in the dog’s system, so they need to be given about ½ hour before the storm hits. For a dog who needs more support than these two drugs provide the anti-anxiety prescription drugs Prozac or Clomicalm can be discussed with your vet. These would need to be given every day during thunderstorm season, and then weaned off per your veterinarian’s directions once Fall arrives. They usually take 4-6 weeks to reach full effect, so if your dog panics very badly when a storm hits, opt to start using them sooner rather than later in the season. Other remedies can be used such as Bach Flower Essences and certain homeopathic remedies. Feel free to consult with a naturopathic or Bach Flower practitioner to learn more about these options.

The good thing about using the specific medications and remedies mentioned above is that they promote learning in the dog. They make it so that the dog learns that they can cope during the storm, and through time their use can be minimized, and hopefully eliminated depending on the depth of fear that the dog has. Some other medications that are frequently prescribed can seem to produce a calm state in your dog,

but do nothing to promote learning or produce a lasting behavioral change in your dog—be very careful about what medications you use when attempting to conquer a behavioral issue.

Some other helpful things you can do for your dog when a storm hits:

- Close the windows
- Turn the light on in the room so they don't see the lightning strikes.
- Put the TV or Radio on
- Turn a fan on and aim it at the dog
- If the dog seeks out the bathroom, but will dart around and not stay in one place during the storm, use a baby gate at the doorway to guide the dog into learning to stay in one spot.
- Try a tight fitting t-shirt on the dog. Many times this will help them feel comforted. There is a product called an Anxiety Wrap or Comfort Wrap that can be put on your dog to give them a feeling of security. Contact Marie for more details on both of these products.

Crate training your dog separately from a thunderstorm is a great idea. That way you will always have a safe place available to your dog wherever you may be when a storm hits. See our Crate Training tips in the Adoption/Rehoming Guide for directions on how to crate train your dog. Once they are happy in their den, you can begin to put them into the crate when the storm first hits. Keep them in there while the storm is active and then open up the door once the storm is past. If you do this repeatedly for ever storm that hits, the dog should start seeking out there safe spot.

If you do not crate train, you can do the above for any safe place that you choose for the dog (such as the bathroom). Above all, do not let the dog run throughout the house while a storm is going on. We want to teach them that they can be calm in their safe place. Many dogs think that they can outrun a storm and bolt during a storm. Be very cautious with these dogs gaining access to an open door or window, they can run many miles before a storm is over!

Don't hesitate to contact us with any Thunderstorm issues that you may have. We can help you develop some coping strategies that will work for your particular dog. It is a problem that can be very debilitating and concerning for all Pet Parents—the good news is that there are steps that you can take now to make things better for your dog over time. The sooner you start helping them during a storm, the sooner you will see results.