

# **Treating Thunderstorm Phobia**

by Dr. Marie Haynes of Ask A Vet Question

To view the entire article, visit <http://www.askavetquestion.com/thunderstorms.php>

## **Environmental changes that will help**

-Find a safe and quiet place for the dog to go:

- the basement
- a quiet bedroom
- a small bathroom with a nice comfortable dog bed.
- build an enclosure that is soundproof

## **Drugs that can be given just before, or during a thunderstorm to reduce anxiety:**

**Alprazolam (Xanax)** – This is an anti anxiety drug. For many dogs it can work well if given just before a storm, or possibly even during a storm.

**Trazodone (Desyrel, and others)** – A [study](#) showed that Trazodone was more effective than Alprazolam at treating thunderstorm phobias in dogs. This is not a drug that is commonly prescribed by veterinarians, but use of Trazodone may become more common as more and more vets become available of its use.

**Acepromazine (Acevet, Atravet)** – This drug is a sedative. Many vets will prescribe this medication to help calm a dog during thunderstorms. However, the drug does not actually have a calming effect! Instead, it will sedate a dog but they still feel fear. While it may work in some situations, I don't regularly prescribe acepromazine for thunderstorm fears.

**Atenolol (Tenormin)** – This is a heart medication. What it does is reduce a dog's heart rate. It is very safe to use. In some cases it helps dogs who are afraid of storms. Some dogs will not show signs of fear because they can't get a fast heart rate when on this drug. However, Atenolol usually doesn't work on its own. If I prescribe it, I will usually prescribe it along with another medication.

**Diphenhydramine (Benadryl)** – While I don't recommend giving Benadryl for thunderstorm anxiety, I thought I would mention it here as many people ask me about whether or not they should try it. Benadryl does have some sedating effect on a dog so it could help a little. But, it really does not tend to work well.

## Long term medications that can be given throughout the thunderstorm season:

**Clomipramine (Clomicalm)** – This is a drug that I will commonly prescribe for dogs who have problems with anxiety. It can often work quite well to help with thunderstorm phobias. However, it is not a drug that you can use sporadically. If I prescribe this medication for storm fear, I usually recommend starting it in the spring time. Then, near the end of the fall we can wean the dog off of the medication.

**Fluoxetine (Prozac, Reconcile)** – This is another anti-anxiety medication that often works well in dogs. Similar to Clomicalm, it would be started at the beginning of thunderstorm season and can be tapered off during the winter months. Recently, a drug company named Elanco has come out with Reconcile which is a canine formulation of the human drug Prozac. This means that more vets will likely be prescribing this drug for anxiety problems.

## Natural treatments for Thunderstorm Fear

**DAP – Dog Appeasing Pheromone** – Most veterinary behavior specialists speak highly of DAP. This product is similar to [Feliway](#) for cats. It releases something called a pheromone which naturally signals the dog to be calm. You can buy it as a plugin diffuser or as a collar that your dog wears.

This product can really help reduce thunderstorm anxiety (but often it will need to be used along with other medications or treatments).

You can buy these online without a prescription at:

[Pet Supplies.com](#)

[Dog.com](#)

[Pet Mountain](#)

[Pet Food Direct](#)

**Melatonin** – Until recently I had never heard of using Melatonin to help with thunderstorm anxiety. There are many homeopathic vets who are recommending it. Last year, I had a question asked on [AskAVetQuestion.com](#) about using melatonin for fear of fireworks (which is very similar to thunderstorm anxiety) : [Can I use Melatonin for Fear of Fireworks?](#)

If you are going to try Melatonin, the dose is 1mg for a small dog or 3 mg for a large dog. You need to be sure to get Melatonin that is meant to be swallowed

and not the type that dissolves under your tongue...unless you have a very talented dog and you can teach him to hold a pill under his tongue. :)

**Rescue Remedy** – This is a homeopathic product that contains a number of flowers that are meant to help reduce anxiety in dogs. There is a lot of testimonial evidence, but not much scientific evidence for its use. There is absolutely no harm in using it. You can buy it online [here](#). However, I have found that for most dogs with thunderstorm anxiety, this product really doesn't work that well.

**Peppermint oil.** Some homeopathic veterinarians will recommend putting one drop of peppermint oil on the bottom of each of the dog's feet to help with thunderstorm phobia. I have actually heard a number of vets claim that this works well for anxious dogs. But, I have yet to have one of my clients try it. If you use this remedy, I'd love for you to leave a comment for me and let me know how it worked for you!

## **Does a Thundershirt work?**

The idea is that applying pressure to several areas on the dog's body has a calming effect on the dog. I did some searching and found some research articles that were interesting:

[Comparison of the effectiveness of a purported anti-static cape \(the Storm Defender®\) vs. a placebo cape in the treatment of canine thunderstorm phobia as assessed by owners' reports](#)

[Use of a Cape in the treatment of canine thunderstorm phobia](#)

I also found an article written by Dr. Janet Tobiassen Crosby of about.com. You can read the article [here](#).

It looks like products like the Thundershirt may actually be helpful for many dogs with thunderstorm anxiety. I would love to hear from any of you who have used one!

You can buy a Thundershirt, [here](#).

# Thunderstorm Desensitization Program:

(program created by Dr. Marie of <http://www.askavetquestion.com>)

Drugs alone are not the best way to treat a dog with thunderstorm anxiety. If you have the patience and time to do this, I would highly recommend a desensitization program to go along with the above therapies. The idea is that you play simulated thunderstorm sounds at a very low volume and teach the dog to enjoy this. (I'll explain how later on). Then, you gradually increase the volume of the recording until the dog can be listening to very loud thunderstorms and not be anxious.

Of course though, playing thunderstorm sounds does not completely simulate a storm as there is no change in atmospheric pressure. But, if you take the steps outlined below, it really should help.

It is best to do this over a period of a week or two. Ideally it would be best to do this training when there are no thunderstorms in the forecast. If a loud thunderstorm happens in the middle of this training period it may set us back a little. It is a good idea to ask your vet for a prescription of either Trazadone or Alprazolam to use on the days when there is a thunderstorm.

## **1. Designate a “safe” place for your dog.**

This could be a bedroom, a bathroom, the basement or even the downstairs. Our first goal is to teach the dog that this place is AWESOME. Don't even think of playing the thunderstorm sounds until we have established that this place is great. It may take a few days to do this.

## **2. Think of a name for your dog's safe place.**

You can call it whatever you want, but for now, I'll call it – “your room”. So, grab a handful of treats and say to your dog, “Hey! Let's go to your room!” Then, walk into the room and give the dog a few treats.

Do this several times a day for a few days. Get really excited about it! Out of the blue just say, “HEY! Let's go to YOUR ROOM!”, and then go with your dog to the safe place and give him treats.

### **3. Teach your dog to be calm in the safe place.**

After you have done this for two to three days, the next step is to teach your dog to be calm and relaxed in his safe place. So, say to him, "Let's go to your room!" Go to the safe place but don't give him any treats. Instead tell him to lie down and then, once he has done that give him treats.

Do this several times a day. However, each time you do it, wait a little bit longer before he gets his treats. The idea is to teach him that he needs to go to his safe place, lie down and be quiet and then he'll get a treat.

Work up to him lying in his safe place for 5 minutes before he gets his treat. Once you have this accomplished then move on to step 4. Again, this may take a few days, so be patient! It's really important not to rush things!

### **4. Introducing some thunderstorm noise.**

In this step, we are going to start playing some thunderstorm noises. You can buy CDs online that play thunderstorm sounds, but I've found some online that you can use for free. Ideally it is best to have these sounds playing out of a good quality stereo (as opposed to your computer speakers.)

(Thank you to the Free Sound Project for supplying these tracks!)

[Thunderstorm](#) – by martin lightning

[Ohio Storm](#) – by Corsica\_S

[Thunderstorm](#) – by inchadney

[Thunderstorm](#) in Berlin – by faruku

Choose one of the above sounds. The first one is a good one to start with. It's good to mix up which sound you play on a given day so that your dog doesn't get accustomed to just one track. Have your dog in the room with you and start playing the thunderstorm track on REALLY low volume. Ideally it's best if you can start the track by using a remote so that your dog doesn't know that you are doing it, but this isn't mandatory.

Watch for signs that your dog is taking note of the sound – ears go up, starts to tremble, looks anxious. The moment you see anything like that then say "Let's go to YOUR ROOM!" and go to the safe place, tell him to lie down and give him treats.

If your dog is super anxious then wait a day before you try this again and try it with the recording at an even lower level.

Later on in the day, repeat this process using the same volume level. We want to make it so that the dog gets excited when he hears thunder because he knows he gets to go to his room and get treats!

## **5. Increasing the intensity**

Once you feel that your dog is enjoying going to his room when the recording is on, then it's time to try the recording at a slightly higher volume. Over the next few days, several times a day we're going to repeat this process. **It is really important that we don't go too fast! If you think your dog is getting anxious then take it down a notch and try again the next day.**

Eventually we should get to the point where we can have the recording blaring at full volume and the dog is happily sitting in his safe place eating treats. Once we get to this point, if you want to you can start to lessen the number of treats and the frequency at which he gets them.

**Important: If your dog is anxious during this process and reducing the volume is not working, then you should highly consider speaking to your veterinarian about using an anti-anxiety medication during the thunderstorm season.**

Also: If you are using a lot of treats during this time period, you may want to decrease the amount of food your dog is getting so that he doesn't gain weight!

Note! This page is for information only and not meant to diagnose or treat your pet. If you have concerns about your pet's issues with thunderstorm anxiety the best thing you can do is to call your veterinarian!

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