Fireworks and animals

THE BLUE CROSS
Britain's pet charity

How to keep your pets safe

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Fireworks and animals

Every year thousands of animals will suffer as a result of fireworks being let off. Blue Cross animal hospitals across the country see a marked rise in pets requiring medication during such stressful times, and many animals are brought into Blue Cross adoption centres having run away from home.

Animals have very acute hearing. Loud bangs and whistles may cause them actual pain in their ears. But by following these simple guidelines your pet need not suffer.
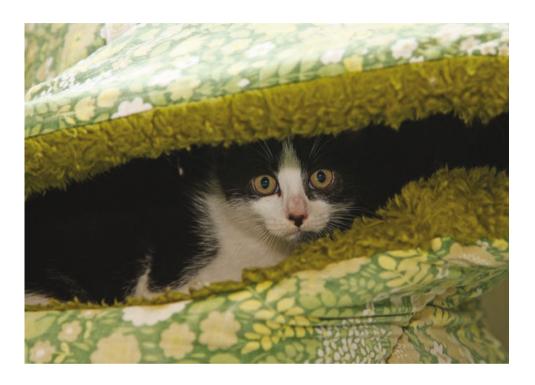
Small pets

Rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters, gerbils, mice, ferrets and birds all need to be treated with special care when fireworks are being let off. These animals are easily frightened. The Blue Cross advises that owners of such types of small animal should follow these precautions.

- Hutches/cages and enclosures should, if possible, be brought into a quiet room indoors, or into a garage or shed.

- Give your pet extra bedding to burrow into so it feels safe.

- If you cannot bring your pet's hutch inside, you should turn its enclosure around so that it faces a wall or fence instead of the open garden.

- Cover any aviaries or hutches with thick blankets or a duvet to block out the sight of the fireworks and deaden the sound of the bangs, but make sure there is enough ventilation.

Dogs & cats

- Always keep dogs and cats inside when fireworks are being let off. Make sure your dog is walked earlier in the day before the fireworks start.

- Close all windows and doors, and block off catflaps to stop pets escaping and to keep noise to a minimum. Draw the curtains, and if the animals are used to the sounds of TV or radio, switch them on (but not too loudly) in order to block out some of the noise of the fireworks.

- Ensure dogs are wearing some form of easily readable identification (ID) – even in the house. They should have at least a collar and tag. Think about fitting pets with a microchip, so that if they do run away they have a better chance of being quickly reunited with you.

- Prepare a 'den' for your pet where it can feel safe and comfortable – perhaps under a bed with some of your old clothes. It may like to hide there when the fireworks start.

- Let your pet pace around, whine, miaow and hide in a corner if it wants to. Do not try to coax it out – it's just trying to find safety, and should not be disturbed.

- Try not to cuddle and comfort distressed pets as they will think you are worried too, and this may make the problem worse. Instead stay relaxed, act normally and praise calm behaviour.

- Avoid leaving your pet alone during such potentially upsetting events. If you do have to leave the house, don't get angry with your pet if you find it has been destructive after being left on its own. Shouting at a frightened pet will only make it more stressed.

- Don't tie your dog up outside while fireworks are being let off, ie outside a shop while you pop inside, or leave it in the garden or in your car.

- Never take your dog to a fireworks display. Even if it doesn't bark or whimper at the noise, it doesn't mean it is happy. Excessive panting and yawning can sometimes indicate that your dog is stressed.

Horses & ponies

- Fireworks must not be set off near livestock or horses in fields, or close to buildings housing livestock. Anyone planning a firework display in a rural area should warn neighbouring farmers in advance.

- Try to make sure that fireworks are never set off near your horse's field or stable. Tell neighbours and local fireworks display organisers there are horses nearby, so that they can ensure fireworks are set off in the opposite direction and well away from them.

- Keep your horse in its familiar environment, in its normal routine with any companions to make it feel secure. If your horse is usually stabled then keep it stabled. If it is normally out in the field, keep it there as long as it is safe, secure and not near the fireworks display area.

- Ensure that you or someone experienced stays with your horse if you know fireworks are being set off. This way you can observe its behaviour, ensure it remains as safe and calm as possible and respond to its reactions appropriately.

- If you know your horse reacts badly to loud noises speak to your vet or perhaps consider moving your horse for the night.

- Try to remain calm and positive as horses can sense unease in a person and this might make things worse if the horse is startled.

- Be careful yourself. Try not to get in the way if your horse becomes startled as you may get hurt.

- Don't take the risk of riding when you think fireworks might be set off.

- If it is necessary for you to leave your horse in the care of another person during a fireworks show, leave clear instructions and contact details for yourself and your vet should any problems arise.

The laws concerning fireworks

- It is illegal for anyone under 18 to possess a firework in a public place.

- Fireworks cannot be set off by a private individual between 11.00pm and 7.00am except for certain nights of the year.

- It is an offence to cause any unnecessary suffering to any captive or domestic animal.

- Unless retailers possess a special licence they may only sell fireworks from 15 October to 10 November and 26 to 31 December.

Think ahead

The Blue Cross advises that all pet owners seek veterinary help for their animal six to 12 weeks before the firework season begins. Behavioural advice for your pet needs to be sought three to six months in advance.

Unfortunately we are often not forewarned about private fireworks displays. Be prepared for 5 November and New Year's Eve, and be proactive about finding out when other celebratory occasions might occur.

While this information is correct at the time of going to print all pet owners are advised to check www.berr.gov.uk/fireworks for current guidelines.