

# AR-News: Melatonin may help calm your cowering canine

THE BOND Fourth of July fireworks are a delight to humans while dogs' acute senses make the noise and smells traumatizing, say Dr. Marty Becker.

While the human family is oohing and aahing over fireworks, many family pets are frightened out of their wits and spend this time of year under the bed, in the basement, cowering, shaking, drooling and seeking safety and comfort even if it means running through a plate glass window to find it.

Dog's senses are much more acute than ours. They hear, smell and sense things only imaginable to humans. Because their hearing is more sensitive at both ends of the spectrum, a benign bottle rocket to us may seem like the first salvo of Armageddon to them. There are also strange smells of gunpowder, objects streaking across the sky, blinding flashes of light and darting children, all of which can trigger a fight-or-flight response.

Such sheer terror keeps veterinary emergency rooms across the country very busy. During this holiday, many veterinarians will see cases of traumatic fireworks injuries, injuries from pets running through windows, escaping from the house or yard and being hit by cars, not to mention diarrhea and colitis from severe stress.

"Leave your dog at home when you go to the fireworks displays," said Suzanne Hetts, a certified applied animal behaviorist in Littleton, CO ([www.animalbehaviorassociates.com](http://www.animalbehaviorassociates.com)). "Dogs do not enjoy fireworks, and you run the significant risk of your dog developing a severe noise phobia that will make summertime unpleasant for you both in the future."

"Keep your dog inside more in the days preceding the fourth," Hetts continues. "Sounds from fireworks are much more intense when the dog is outside as compared to inside. Keeping him in will not only offer some degree of dampening of the loudness, but he will have more places to hide inside than outside. Lastly, should he become panicked enough to try to escape, he won't be able to get out of the yard if he's inside."

"Phobias don't get better with age," said Amy D. Shojai, author of "Complete Care For Your Aging Dog." "A combination approach works best. I like the new plug-in product D.A.P. (Dog Appeasing Hormone) that fills the air with a calming scent to take the edge off doggy fear. At the same time, give the dog a job to do during the fireworks like retrieving a tennis ball, practicing heel or gnawing on a rawhide chew."

Although we try to comfort our pets, Dr. Rolan Tripp, a veterinary behaviorist and adjunct professor at Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine said, "don't reward the fear." What has a calming effect is for them to see that you aren't freaking out. If you remain calm and don't baby them, they'll be closer to learning how to handle loud noises.

"For some dogs, whatever their owners try to do for them on July the fourth to curtail their misery just doesn't work," said Dr. Nicholas Dodman of Tufts University and author of "If Only They Could Speak." "For those poor, sensitive creatures, medical treatment, including the oral administration of the neurohormone, melatonin, often provides much needed relief."

Dr. Linda Aronson of PetShrink in Norfolk, Mass., said that melatonin works for about 80 percent of her patients and can turn their fears into acceptance or indifference in 10 to 15 minutes. Aronson said that melatonin is safe to use as long as necessary as there appears to be no habituation.

"The dose for dogs is 1 milligram for dogs under 10 pounds, 1.5 milligrams for dogs 10-25 pounds, 3 milligrams for dogs weighing 25-100 pounds and whereas 3 milligrams is often enough for dogs over 100 pounds, you can give them up to 6 milligrams," Aronson said.

Aronson cautions people to use plain melatonin tablets, not sublingual, time release or capsule forms.

Dodman cautions that while melatonin is available over-the-counter at pharmacies and health food stores everywhere, you should always consult your veterinarian for an exact dosage and blessing.

Some dogs do well with melatonin in their system before the noises begin. The experts advise giving the first dose at least 30 minutes before you expect fireworks to begin. Aronson said you can give up to three doses a day, so if you live in a very unpredictable neighborhood, you can give it to your pets when you get up and repeat as necessary.

Unlike people on melatonin, most dogs don't sleep.

A technique called progressive desensitization can help noise-phobic dogs. However, it may be too late to begin to desensitize him before the fourth of July this year, Hetts said. Make a commitment to work with a behaviorist as soon as firework season is over so you'll be prepared for next year.

And so this Independence Day holiday, while we enjoy our parades, picnics and fireworks, remember to protect your beloved four-legged family member. After all, since it's his job to protect and serve you the other 364, the least we can do is return the favor.

•Dr. Marty Becker appears frequently on ABC-TV's "Good Morning America" and now on two nationally syndicated radio programs, "Pets Unleashed" a two-hour live talk program and a two-minute vignette, "The Pet Update" on the national talk network, Talk ONE. Write to him in care of Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service, 790 National Press Building, Washington, D.C. 20045.