

## **Thunderstorm and Noise Phobias**

A dog's phobic response to loud noises can result in injury to the animal and damage to the environment. It remains one of the most devastating and difficult behavior problems to manage. Behavior modification can be successful in eliminating a dog's fearful response to noises but the implementation of these techniques is often difficult.

Although hypnotics, sedatives, and major tranquilizers can suppress a dog's phobic response to noises, the effects of the drugs often last for 24 – 48 hours and have other undesirable side effects. I have found that the benzodiazepines, diazepam and clorazepate dipotassium, can successfully suppress a dog's fear response to thunderstorms. Oral administration of diazepam can take effect in twenty minutes. A distinct advantage of the drug is that it has a very short half life. Be aware, however, that benzodiazepines can have a paradoxical effect and result in restlessness and excitability. Diazepam also increases appetite and after the thunderstorm is over the dog may engage in food scavenging and obnoxious food-getting behaviors for several hours. I distinctly remember one husky-mixed breed who was successfully treated with diazepam during a thunderstorm phobia but afterward broke the cookie jars on the counter in an attempt to satisfy his appetite. The dog had never done anything like this before. I also have had several dogs while under the influence of diazepam exhibit aggressive behaviors not previously demonstrated. Owners of a Schnauzer, successfully being treated with diazepam for its fear response to thunderstorms, mentioned that their dog now growled at visitors. Previously the dog had only barked. A mixed-breed puppy, that was afraid of strangers and submissively urinated when petted by visitors, was medicated with diazepam. Subsequently, the puppy barked aggressively and growled when people reached for it. Dr. Sue McDonnell, University of Pennsylvania, also related to me that horses under the influence of diazepam were often reported by the grooms to be harder to manage. It is my opinion that diazepam suppresses or reduces fear of people allowing more assertive and offensive, aggressive behaviors to be exhibited. I would weigh carefully the benefits of using diazepam versus the possible side effect of aggression, especially regarding animals that are already exhibiting aggressive behaviors.

Dr. Elizabeth Shull-Selcer, University of Tennessee, has been studying noise phobias in dogs for several years. She discovered that dogs with moderate anxiety responses to thunderstorms respond well to propranolol but the drug does not appear to suppress severe phobic responses to thunderstorms. Presently, Dr. Shull-Selcer is evaluating the effects of alprazolam on dogs with noise phobias.