

How Sounds and Lights Affect Our Dogs and Cats

By Stephanie Bouchard

When Dr. Marty Becker, known nationally as “America’s veterinarian,” and his wife sit down to watch true crime shows on TV, they wear wireless headphones so when the intense music on the program starts up, their dogs and cats are spared the scary sounds. “We’ve really tried to create an oasis in our own home because of knowing how sensitive they are,” Dr. Becker says.

We all have heard that our pet cats and dogs have more sensitive hearing and vision than we do, but it may be hard for us to conceive of how the sounds and lights made for human ears and eyes affect them. The beeping of the timer on your kitchen stove may be annoying to listen to for you, but ear piercing for your cat. And the solid images you see on your TV? They’re rapidly flickering to your dog’s eyes.

Understanding the Differences

Humans hear in the range of about 20 to 20,000 Hz; dogs, 67 to 45,000 Hz; and cats, 45 to 64,000 Hz. Our pets can hear things that we can’t. They also see better in low-light conditions than we do and detect motion better than we can.

Although we don’t know for sure to what degree or how consistently the sounds and lights made for humans are bothering our pets, we can make some reasonable guesses based on other knowledge we have about the health

and well-being of dogs and cats, says Dr. Candace Croney, a professor of animal behavior and well-being and director of Purdue University’s Center for Animal Welfare Science who has studied auditory stress in kenneled dogs.

“It’s entirely possible that between microwaves, phones, TVs, the types of lights we have in our homes—all of that

can be impacting our cats and our dogs all day [and] all night in ways that we’re not really cognizant of,” Dr. Croney says.

“What we could potentially be doing,” she adds, “is creating a little bit of a stress response” in our pets, and that can trigger their fight-or-flight (fear) response, cause behavioral issues, affect their immune and endocrine functions, and disrupt their sleep cycles. And just like in humans, some sound levels can cause physical pain and damage hearing in cats and dogs.

Paying Attention to Patterns

How can we tell if the sounds and lights in our homes are bothering our pets?

“Every cat and dog is an individual, and their tolerance and their adaptability for things is going to be individual to them,” Dr. Croney says. Pay attention to them, and look at their patterns:

- Does your pet hide under the bed when you have guests visiting and there are a lot of loud voices and laughter?
- Do they cower in a corner or burrow under a blanket if you’re listening to loud music?



- Do they whine or bark or race out of the room when the washing machine buzzer goes off?

“For many of our cats and dogs, because they will oftentimes choose to interact with their people, they may be tolerating lights and noise that aren’t ideal for them,” she says. “So we should just be more aware and more careful about giving them options, so that they don’t have to choose between hanging out with their favorite people and not having their senses bombarded.”

Reducing the Noise

Here are some changes we can make to lessen how the sounds and lights made for us affect the dogs and cats who live with us.

Turn Down the Volume

If possible, turn down the volume of the music you play or your TV. Like Dr. Becker and his wife, consider using wireless headsets. Some hearing aids can be paired with devices so wearers can adjust the sound to their preferences without affecting those around them.

Keep Electronic and Ultrasonic Devices Out of Their Sleeping Space

“You don’t want your various personal electronics making noises

that the pets can hear and therefore they’re not resting,” says Heather Lewis, architect and principal at Animal Arts, a Colorado-based architectural firm that designs animal care buildings. Poor-quality speakers are a particular problem, she notes, because they may make noises not in the targeted range: “You might have a speaker that’s squealing that you don’t even know is squealing.”

Avoid Whitener-Added Fabrics

Cats can see into the ultraviolet light spectrum, Heather says, and white fabric treated with whiteners will fluoresce under their vision. This means these fabrics may appear to be glaringly bright to our feline family members.

Swap Out Bright Night-Lights

Night-lights help us navigate to the bathroom in the dark, but they can disrupt our pets’ sleep cycles, says Dr. Croney. Position them away from your pets’ sleeping areas, or swap them out for lights that are a soft orange, recommends Heather.

“Be particularly aware of white lights, blue lights—anything toward the colder end of the spectrum is really hard on your pet,” Heather says, which explains why you can use soft orange light (at the warmer end of the spectrum)

at night without disturbing your pet very much.

Recognizing Outside Sounds That Can Cause Stress

One of Dr. Becker’s dogs flips out when there are thunderstorms. “He just goes off the rails,” Dr. Becker says. “And when that happens, it’s full-blown, level 5 fear, anxiety, stress—shivering, shaking, panting, yawning, salivating.”

Dr. Becker, who founded Fear Free, a program that educates pet professionals and pet parents on how to create environments that support pet well-being, takes preventive measures so his dog doesn’t have such a traumatic reaction. He gives his dog a prescription medication if thunderstorms are in the forecast.

Fireworks and thunder can cause fear, anxiety, and stress (FAS) for many pets, but unfortunately, these sounds are out of our control. In addition to veterinary-prescribed medication for those pets like Dr. Becker’s who have an extreme response to certain noises, we can offer nonpharmaceutical options.

Try a Compression Shirt or Ear Protection Muffs on Your Pet

These wearable devices can be helpful for dogs when there are thunderstorms or fireworks, says Dr. Becker.

Create a Safe Space

Provide a space where your dog or cat can retreat to get a respite from sensory stimuli that could be overwhelming, says Dr. Croney. “[For instance], rather than shoo them out of the closet that they’re constantly going into, think about why they might be going into it, and if it’s really not a problem for them to be there, give them a space to be there.”

When not walking her cat on leash around their yard in Maine, freelance writer Stephanie Bouchard writes about pets and healthcare.

