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By Dr. Nicholas Dodman, BVMS, DACVB

As July 4th approaches, I would like to address an issue that troubles a vast number of our canine companions—fireworks phobia. This is not simply a case of dogs disliking loud sounds. It is a true phobia—an irrational, excessive fear response that often escalates over time if left untreated.

Why Are Dogs So Afraid of Fireworks?

Dogs hear better than we do, and the unpredictable nature of fireworks—booms, whistles, crackles—combined with flashes of light - trigger a heightened startle reflex. Unlike thunderstorms, fireworks provide no environmental cues, such as barometric pressure changes, giving dogs no warning to brace themselves.

For dogs predisposed to noise phobia, fireworks can be terrifying, often causing:

- Trembling
- Pacing
- Hiding
- Excessive panting
- Urination or defecation
- Destructive behavior or escape attempts

In severe cases, this can be life-threatening—I have treated dogs that crashed through windows or fences trying to flee.

What Can You Do?

1. **Avoidance Through Desensitization and Counterconditioning:** Start months in advance. Use recorded firework sounds, played at low volume while engaging your dog with treats or play. Gradually increase the volume over time. This method can be effective but requires patience and consistency. This process does not work well when dogs are already terrified of fireworks.
2. **Safe Space Creation:** Create a calm, insulated sound-proof refuge. A crate covered with blankets, or an interior closet lined with pillows, can help. A basement, if you have one, is ideal. Play white noise or calming music. Never confine a panicked dog unless the space is familiar and comforting.

3. Behavior Medications: For severe cases, I recommend pre-treatment with prescription anxiolytics. Drugs like alprazolam or dexmedetomidine (Sileo gel) can be extremely helpful when used under veterinary supervision. Sileo is FDA-approved for canine noise aversion.

Nutraceuticals and Natural Aids

Now to the common question: Are there nutraceuticals that work? Yes—some have shown promise in peer-reviewed studies, although effects are milder than prescription medications. A few options include:

- L-theanine (Anxitane): An amino acid found in green tea, L-theanine promotes calmness without sedation.
- S-Adenosylmethionine (SAME, e.g., Denosyl): Often used for cognitive support, SAME has mood-stabilizing effects.
- CBD Oil (THC-free, veterinarian-formulated): Anecdotal support is strong, and early studies are promising, but product quality and dosage are key.

While these products are not cures, they can take the edge off when used proactively and in combination with environmental control and, if needed, behavior-modifying medications.

Final Word

The Fourth of July should not be a nightmare for our dogs. With preparation, understanding, and appropriate support—nutraceutical or pharmaceutical—we can spare them unnecessary suffering.

Let us treat fireworks phobia not as a nuisance, but as the serious behavioral emergency it often is.