

# Separation Anxiety

- Separation anxiety is a behavior problem in which a dog panics after (and sometimes before) being left alone.
- The signs of separation anxiety can be associated with other behavioral and medical problems, so your veterinarian will need to examine your dog to make a diagnosis.
- There are many effective treatments for separation anxiety.

### The Basics

Separation anxiety is a behavior problem in which a dog panics after (and sometimes before) being left alone. Dogs with this problem may vocalize, pace, urinate, defecate, and/or engage in destructive behavior before and/or after their owner leaves. Escape attempts by affected dogs can result in self-injury and household destruction, especially around windows and doors.

It isn't exactly clear why dogs develop separation anxiety. However, many more dogs that have been adopted from shelters are affected compared with dogs that have the same owner since puppyhood. Therefore, it is thought that loss of an important person(s) in a dog's life can cause separation anxiety. The development of separation anxiety has also been associated with changes in the owner's schedule or residence.

### Signs and Diagnosis

The following signs of separation anxiety are usually most severe within the first 15 to 20 minutes after a dog is left alone, but they can also occur before the owner leaves.

- Indoor destructiveness (e.g., digging, chewing)
- Barking, whining, and/or howling
- Urinating and/or defecating
- Pacing
- Escaping
- Constantly following the owner around the house

- Drooling or panting
- Chewing or licking the paws or tail
- Refusing to eat
- Sadness

These signs can also be associated with other behavioral and medical problems, so your veterinarian will need to examine your dog to make a diagnosis. Dogs that have separation anxiety may also have noise and thunderstorm phobias, so your dog may also be evaluated for these conditions.

### Treatment

If you suspect that your dog has separation anxiety, contact your veterinarian right away. The goal of treating separation anxiety is to teach your dog to enjoy, or at least tolerate, being left alone. To help ease your dog's anxiety, your veterinarian may make several recommendations, such as the following. Before you begin any treatment plan, please thoroughly discuss it with your veterinarian.

Don't punish your dog. These anxious behaviors aren't due to disobedience or spite. They are distress responses. If you punish your dog, he or she may become even more upset, which could worsen the problem.

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Counterconditioning is a treatment that associates the sight or presence of a feared or disliked person, animal, place, object, or situation with something your dog enjoys. For dogs with mild separation anxiety, counterconditioning focuses on developing

## Behavior and Training

an association between being alone and getting a reward, such as delicious food. To develop this association, an affected dog may be given a reward (e.g., a puzzle toy filled with a treat) every time his or her owner leaves the house.

Moderate or severe cases of separation anxiety may require a more complex program involving desensitization and counterconditioning. This program requires guidance from a trained veterinary professional, and anxiety must be avoided for it to work. This treatment might start by having you desensitize your dog to the normal cues that you are leaving. This can be accomplished by regularly acting like you're about to leave without actually doing so. The next phase of treatment may involve leaving your dog briefly (1 or 2 minutes) without causing anxiety. The time you're gone is gradually increased over a period of weeks. Once your dog can tolerate your absence for an hour or two, he or she should be ready to handle longer periods of time. During this process, all good-byes and greetings with your dog should be conducted calmly.

Physical and mental activity can help reduce your dog's stress level. Keep him or her busy with regular exercise, obedience or agility training, or food puzzle toys.

Confine your dog to a portion of the house when you leave. This makes some dogs feel more secure

and can reduce damage to your house. Don't crate your dog if he or she is not used to being crated. To determine whether you should try using a crate, place your dog in a crate while you're home and monitor his or her behavior. Signs of distress (e.g., heavy panting, excessive salivation, escape attempts, persistent howling or barking) may indicate that crate confinement is not an immediate option; however, it may still be a good option in the future. If you confine your dog to a room or crate, be sure to provide fresh water and a comfortable place to sleep. Please discuss proper crate training methods with your veterinarian.

Use background noise to help your dog feel safe. Play a recording of your voice, or leave a television or radio on while you're gone.

If your dog doesn't respond to the suggestions above, your veterinarian may recommend anti-anxiety medications. When used with behavioral training, these medications have helped many dogs overcome separation anxiety. Always consult your veterinarian before giving your dog any type of medication for a behavior problem.

### Prevention

To help prevent separation anxiety, accustom your new puppy to being alone for brief periods and then gradually longer ones. In addition, reward only the behavior that you want to reinforce in your dog.