

## Separation Anxiety

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Separation anxiety is an important behavioral problem, which can cause tremendous emotional distress for both dogs and owners. It can occur in dogs of any age or breed, and is one of the most common reasons for pet owners to euthanize or give up their dogs.



### What are the signs of separation anxiety?

A dog with separation anxiety becomes abnormally anxious when separated from his owner. The severity of the anxiety and the behaviors that the dog exhibits vary from individual to individual. Some dogs become anxious if they cannot actually see their owner; they constantly follow the owner from room to room. Other dogs can tolerate being alone in a room but will check frequently to reassure themselves that the owner is still in the house, and then go back to playing or chewing on a bone in another area. Still other dogs do not become anxious until the owner actually leaves the home. Some dogs become most anxious as soon as the owner leaves, and other dogs have a period of time during which they are comfortable alone, but they become anxious if the owner is gone for an extended period.



This anxiety often increases the longer the owner is gone, and can result in behaviors such as whining, pacing, salivation, barking, howling, hyperactivity, scratching, chewing, digging, urinating or defecating, and destruction of personal items or household objects. Dogs with separation anxiety often exhibit more than one of these behaviors. Dogs have been known to break their teeth and tear their nails and skin trying to get out of crates, and to destroy doors, and jump through windows as their anxiety increases.

Dogs with separation anxiety also often have an overly excited response when their owner returns home. They may whine, jump, or run in circles. This behavior may go on for an abnormal length of time after the owner gets home, and the dog will have the same extreme response even if the owner has only been gone for a few minutes.

### What causes separation anxiety?

No one knows, for certain, why some dogs develop separation anxiety and others do not. Separation anxiety can occur in animals from multiple or single-pet homes. Separation anxiety may be more likely to occur in animals with a history of abuse or of multiple homes. Dogs that have missed out on normal social interaction with people or other animals, especially as puppies, may also be at increased risk. A dog that has never had a prior problem may develop separation anxiety when there is a change in the owner's work schedule, or after the household has moved to a new home. Some dogs may develop separation anxiety as they grow older.

It is important for owners of dogs with separation anxiety to understand that the inappropriate behavior the dog is exhibiting is due to anxiety, and not because the dog is angry or trying to 'get back' at the owner. Scolding or punishing the dog will only lead to confusion, more anxiety, and worse behavior. By videotaping some dogs whose owners have punished the dog for his destructive behavior, they have demonstrated that the dog's anxiety level increases just before the owner would normally come home. In these cases, behaviorists feel the dog's problem behavior is not due to anxiety about being alone, but because the dog is anxious about the probable punishment it will receive when the owner returns.

### What should I do if I suspect my dog has separation anxiety?



If you feel your dog has separation anxiety, the first step is to discuss the situation with your veterinarian and have the dog undergo a complete physical examination. It is important to make sure that your dog's behavior is truly due to separation anxiety and not to something else. (For instance, inappropriate urination may occur if your dog was never actually fully housetrained, or if he has a urinary tract infection. A dog may bark when alone because he feels he is protecting his property, or because he can hear

another dog.)

Your veterinarian may recommend some testing to make sure your dog does not have any underlying medical problems, which could contribute to behavior problems or make them worse. Tests may include a **complete blood count**, a **chemistry profile**, **urinalysis**, thyroid testing, a blood pressure check, and an ECG. These tests will also be important to verify the health status of your dog prior to being placed on any medication. Be sure that your veterinarian is aware of any other medication your dog is already taking, and any previous health problems.

### How is separation anxiety treated?

For dogs with separation anxiety, the most effective approach is usually a combination of behavior modification exercises and anti-anxiety medication. It is essential to realize that both medication and behavior modification exercises are important parts of therapy for dogs with separation anxiety. In most cases, using one component alone will not be sufficient to achieve success. The medication is used to help your dog relax so that she can concentrate on performing the behavior modification exercises; the exercises are what actually change the dog's response to a stressful situation, over time.

**Medications:** Commonly used medications include **clomipramine** and **amitriptyline**, which can be prescribed by your veterinarian. Any anti-anxiety drug prescribed by your veterinarian needs to be given exactly as directed. Dogs with separation anxiety have a higher overall anxiety level, and drugs used as part of a treatment plan for separation anxiety need to be given regularly, not just when the dog seems anxious. Patience is important; it can take weeks to months for certain drugs to become effective. It is often necessary to try several drugs or combinations of drugs, to determine what will work best for an individual dog.

**Behavior modification:** Your veterinarian may be able to give you help with the behavior modification exercises, or refer you to an experienced animal behaviorist or trainer in your area. For the best result, it is important that the person you work with has had experience working with dogs with separation anxiety.

Behavior modification exercises must be done consistently (for weeks to months) to see results, and the exercises may need to be continued for life. For an idea of some basic things you can try at home to help your dog feel less anxious, see the section on lonely/anxious barkers in the article "**Barking: A Common Behavior Problem.**"

Another component of behavior modification that may help your dog to be less anxious is increased exercise. Exercise has mental as well as physical benefits for dogs. Veterinary behaviorists often recommend 45-60 minutes of intense activity twice a day. If your dog is a 'couch potato,' start out slow and build up the intensity and length of time over several weeks. If your dog has any health problems, check with your veterinarian before starting the exercise program.



In addition to exercise, mental stimulation (playing fetch, working on commands, practicing agility exercises at home or in a class) is also important. Many types of dogs were originally bred to do a job, and they can become stressed without the mental activity they would normally use if they were "working."

## Conclusion

Keep in mind that your dog does not have this problem behavior because he is mad at you or trying to 'get back' at you. Punishment, especially after the fact, will only be confusing and cause more anxiety. Always start with a visit to your veterinarian to rule out health problems. Separation anxiety can be a very frustrating and traumatic situation for both you and your dog, but with patience and proper treatment it can usually be dramatically improved.

## References

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