

Separation Anxiety in Dogs

By Sherry Woodard

What is separation anxiety?

It is anxiety that manifests itself as visible stress within 30 minutes of the departure of the dog's person. The anxiety can vary from mild to severe. Separation anxiety is preventable and responds well when treated.



What causes separation anxiety?

By nature, dogs are pack animals – they don't like being alone. Many dogs who are in stable, structured homes will never suffer from separation anxiety, even if their people go off to work every day. In some dogs, however, separation anxiety might be triggered if there's a change in the dog's routine or the family's daily life. But, a dog will often accept change in his human family more easily if he is not the only pet.

Are there specific times when separation anxiety can begin?

Here are some circumstances that may result in separation anxiety:

- A new home (a move for the dog to a new family)
- A change in the amount of time you are absent
- A move to a different house (with the same family)
- The death of a family member (human or otherwise)
- A new baby
- Time spent in a boarding kennel or away from you
- Time spent at the veterinary clinic

What are the signs of separation anxiety?

If you are making preparations to leave, the dog may follow you from room to room. Other signs are pacing, excessive salivating, vomiting, barking, howling or whining. During your absence, your dog may engage in destructive behavior, often directed at the exits (windows and doors) or clothing or other items that have your scent. An otherwise house-trained dog may eliminate inappropriately. In severe cases, the dog may have a panic attack and hurt herself by breaking through windows or attempting to get out of her crate. (Crating dogs with separation anxiety is not recommended, since they often become even more stressed.)

Could these symptoms mean something else?

A visit to the veterinarian to check your dog's health is always recommended if your dog's behavior changes suddenly. Your vet can help diagnose whether your dog's problem is truly separation anxiety. The above symptoms could be a sign of a medical

problem, such as seizures, diabetes, Cushing's disease, renal disease, cystitis, or gastrointestinal distress. Dogs who are unable to control their bladder and bowel functions may become destructive trying to get outside to eliminate.

Behavioral or training issues should also be ruled out. The above symptoms could be a sign of one of the following:

- A need for house training
- A marking habit
- Submissive or excitement urination
- Teething
- Boredom chewing or digging
- Cognitive dysfunction
- A phobia about thunderstorms or other sounds

What can I do about separation anxiety?

If you have been told that your dog has mild to moderate separation anxiety, there are some strategies you can try to break the cycle of escalating anxiety. First, practice leaving without opening the door. Put on your shoes, pick up your keys, and walk to the door, but don't leave. You may need to do this 10 times per day for weeks or months to quell your dog's anxiety.

Another strategy is to walk into closets and close the door behind you. Wait one minute and then reappear. You can also exit via an outside door that you normally don't leave through. Wait one minute and then walk back in. If your dog doesn't appear anxious, try two minutes and add time if the dog continues to be comfortable with it. Back off on your time, however, if the dog becomes stressed.

Once your dog is comfortable with you leaving through the back door, you can start working on walking out the main door and returning after a short period of time. Again, gradually increase the time according to how your dog handles it. Practice as many absences as possible that last less than 10 minutes.

Here are some additional tips to improve your chances of success:

- Make sure your dog gets plenty of exercise. Being physically tired helps everyone to relax.
- Offer the dog a Kong toy stuffed with treats before practicing the leaving-and-returning exercises.
- Ignore the dog before and during the exercises.
- Provide background noise (the radio or television) during the exercises. The background sounds may provide a reassuring cue that you will return soon. You can also use a word as a cue. Say the words ("I'll be back" or "Later") every time you exit.
- Keep your arrivals and departures as quiet and calm as possible. Don't indulge in long goodbyes or excited greetings.

Depending on how severe your dog's case is, you may not be able to leave the dog

alone at all during treatment. If you do have to leave, minimize the time that the dog is alone. Use a dog sitter, dog walker, or doggy daycare; have the dog stay with a friend or family member at their home. Inquire about the possibility of your dog going to work with you.

If your dog is suffering from severe separation anxiety, an individual evaluation with a behavior specialist is recommended. Together, you can create a plan to relieve your dog's anxiety and keep him safe. Resolving separation anxiety may require months of work from you, but please don't give up on your dog. Most of the time, this condition responds to treatment. If your dog is not improving or you are feeling frustrated, seek professional help from a behavior specialist

How can I prevent separation anxiety in the first place?

After you bring your dog or puppy home for the first time, acclimate him to periods of time away from you by practicing departures and brief absences. If you get in the habit of providing your dog with a loaded Kong, your dog may even look forward to you leaving! Only give treats as you leave, however, not upon your arrival home.

As mentioned above, make sure your dog gets plenty of exercise. To help her learn to relax after playing, give her gentle massages. You should also challenge your dog mentally by working on obedience training and problem solving (such as a game of hide-and-seek). All of these activities, both physical and mental, help to build the dog's confidence and make her less anxious in general.

Sherry Woodard is the dog training and care consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends' No More Homeless Pets mission.

See also: Fear of Thunder and Other Loud Noises