

Separation Anxiety

ABOUT THE DIAGNOSIS

Separation anxiety is a diagnosis referring to distress experienced by dogs, or less commonly by cats, when left alone. Typical behaviors include destructiveness, howling or barking, and urination or defecation. Some dogs may drool or lick their paws excessively.

The tendency to become anxious probably has a genetic component. However, dogs that have been abandoned or had multiple homes may be overrepresented in the population of affected dogs. Repeated abandonment is traumatic for social species. Sometimes a change in the pet's usual routine such as a change in the family structure, a move to a new home, or a stay in a boarding kennel triggers separation anxiety.

Other causes of similar behaviors should be ruled out. For example, urination or defecation in the house could be a result of inadequate house training or due to a medical problem such as a bladder infection. Barking or howling could be a response to noises that the dog hears. The hallmark of separation anxiety is that the problem behaviors occur primarily or exclusively when the dog is separated from his or her caretaker (either left alone or left apart, like in a different room) and *always* occur whenever the dog is left alone for more than a few minutes. Dogs with separation anxiety often show excessive, frantic greeting behaviors when the owner returns. They may also react with excitement, depression, or anxiety to the owner's preparations to leave the house.

LIVING WITH THE DIAGNOSIS

Separation anxiety can be effectively treated, but dogs that have suffered from it may be prone to relapse in stressful situations, such as a change in routine or a move to a new home. Separation anxiety can be a life-threatening disorder in two ways. First, dogs may seriously harm themselves such as by pawing at a window and the window shatters, or by escaping from a yard and being hit by a car. Second, the behavior may be so unacceptable to an owner that if the owner does not recognize the need for treatment, and provide the treatment that the dog needs, the dog may eventually be relinquished and/or euthanized.

TREATMENT

Separation anxiety is an emergency. Antianxiety medications are almost always recommended. Scientific studies prove that these medications speed up good results learned through standardized behavioral modification designed to teach pets to relax. This might include daily medications designed to improve anxiety and also 'as needed' medications to abort panic and arousal. Your veterinarian and/or a specialist in veterinary behavioral medicine (www.dacvb.org) can work with you to decide which medications may be suitable for your dog or cat. Medications will be given for at least 4-6 months; after that time, you can decide if medications must be continued or if behavioral training has made regular use of medication unnecessary.

Behavior modification involves teaching dogs to be calm, to attend to you, and learn that they have some control over their arousal levels. Accordingly, no matter how much damage they do and how annoying you find them, no dog or cat should be physically or verbally punished. This also means that you should not use shock or bark collars.

Dogs know that distress is painful, but they can learn that they feel better if they are more relaxed and less aroused. The key to making behavior modification successful is to incorporate it into every bit of everyday life. If you ask the dog to sit, look at you and take a deep breath before providing love (praise and/or a treat), and you do this hundreds of times a day, you will reward and reinforce calm behavior. If you tell dogs that they are brilliant when they are not distressed, even if they are sleeping, you will reward calm behavior. If you can learn to recognize distress and anxiety you can, yourself, be calm and sit, and ask the dog to do the same, rather than inadvertently helping the dog to be more aroused. A specialist in veterinary behavioral medicine can help design a behavior modification plan that can work well in your household.

While there are many prescriptive plans, there are no quick fixes and no 'one-size-fits-all solutions'. Crating the dog is a common recommendation, but it will work *ONLY* if the dog is happy in and likes his or her crate (<http://www.dacvb.org/wp-content/uploads/Tip1-Crate-training.pdf>). Many dogs panic when crated or kenneled and they worsen dramatically as a result. These dogs will benefit from doggie day care if they cannot go with you when you leave the home.

Early intervention is absolutely key to the best outcome. Seek professional help from your veterinarian at the first signs that suggest that your dog or cat is distressed when left alone. This will give you the best opportunity to design an effective treatment plan for your family member.

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Practice Stamp or Name & Address

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