

Separation Anxiety in Dogs

Separation anxiety is one of the most common problems that dog owners face. The term is sometimes misused to describe any dog who barks or gets into trouble when his owner is away, but the true definition is a dog who panics when left alone.

Diagnosing Separation Anxiety

If you think your dog has separation anxiety, use a video camera to record his behavior while you're gone. A dog who shows any of the following signs only while their owner is away may have separation anxiety:

- **Excessive vocalization:** Howling, screaming, crying or barking either for a half hour after the owner leaves, half an hour before the owner returns, or the entire time the owner is gone.
 - **House soiling in a housetrained dog:** Dogs that are well housetrained while the owner is present, and only soil when the owner is absent may have separation anxiety. Typically, these dogs will become so anxious they lose bodily functions while the owner is gone.
 - **Destructive escape behaviors:** Dogs with separation anxiety often display a pattern of destructive chewing and clawing around doors and windows. Look for objects knocked off of window sills, blinds pulled down, etc. You might also see a pattern of extreme destructiveness in which your dog frantically chews on everything. This kind of destruction will be more extreme than caused by a dog searching for food or engaging in boredom behaviors.
 - **Excessive drooling:** Look for wet spots around the house and wetness on your dog's chest and legs.
 - **Anorexia:** Dogs with separation anxiety often don't touch food or treats while their owner is gone. A bored dog, on the other hand, will happily eat in his owner's absence.
 - **Excessive following behavior:** Dogs with separation anxiety often follow their owners everywhere.
 - **Excessive greeting:** Acting overly frantic and active when reunited with their owner.
-

What Causes Separation Anxiety?

- **Genetic predisposition:** There is evidence that certain dogs may be genetically predisposed to anxiety-related conditions.
- **Thunderstorm phobia:** Thunderstorm phobia and separation anxiety tend to go hand in hand.
- **Never learning to be alone:** Separation anxiety may be more likely, or more severe, in dogs that have never successfully learned to be alone, such as dogs who have always lived with another dog, or whose owners are always home. As a social species, it's not instinctual for dogs to be completely alone, and this behavior must be learned at a young age.

Preventing Separation Anxiety in Puppies

Because separation anxiety is much easier to prevent than to treat, taking steps early to train your dog to be away from you is something every puppy parent should think about. Putting in this effort now will save you heartache, frustration, and costly repairs when your dog is older.

- **Teach your puppy to feel comfortable in a crate.**
- **Teach your puppy to be alone.** Make time in your day for your puppy to be alone, either in his crate or in a puppy-proofed area. This may sound silly and unnecessary if you work from home or are retired, but if you don't do this it can set the stage for separation anxiety later on.
- **Keep greetings and departures low-key.** Highly emotional comings and goings tend to ramp up a dog's arousal level which over time can make it harder for him to be left alone. If you're anxious or emotional about leaving, you might unintentionally transmit that tension to your dogs. Some owners leave without saying good-bye at all.
- **Help your puppy associate your departure with good things.** Think of the things you typically do before you leave: Putting on your coat, jingling your keys, picking up your bag or briefcase, etc. Start doing these activities when you're not leaving, give your puppy something he loves (like a stuffed Kong or a favorite toy), and put him in his crate. Wait a short time and take him out before he's finished with his treat. The idea is to teach him to associate the signs of your departure with feeling good. Some owners save high-value toys and treats for alone time to help this process along.
- **Follow a "nothing in life is free" protocol.** It's important for puppies to learn that they must earn the things they want. Ask your puppy to sit before being fed, going out to play, even being pet.
- **Make sure your puppy gets plenty of exercise.** Appropriate exercise depends on the age of your puppy, but free play with other puppies, gentle fetch games, and short walks can all burn off excess energy. Keep exercise sessions short and allow the puppy plenty of rest periods. Avoid long walks (over a mile) and runs until your dog is 1 year old. The growth plates at the ends of his bones are still developing, and hard exercise can cause swelling or even stunted growth.

Treating Separation Anxiety

Contact a veterinary behaviorist or your own veterinarian about treatments to help reduce anxiety in the dog. You may also look into placing your dog into a local Doggy Daycare if you are able to. This will help your dog be socialized while you are gone and learn that it's ok for you to leave.

If you would like to learn more about separation anxiety, read "I'll Be Home Soon" by Patricia McConnell.