

Separation Anxiety

ABOUT THE DIAGNOSIS

Separation anxiety refers to behavioral problems that only occur when a pet is left alone. Typical behaviors included destructiveness, howling or barking, and urination or defecation. Some dogs may drool or lick their paws excessively. The licking can lead to skin sores on the legs or paws called acral lick dermatitis (lick granulomas). Dogs are most often young adults when the problem appears, but some older dogs can develop separation anxiety due to a decline in cognitive function (senility).

The reason one dog develops separation anxiety when another in similar circumstances does not is not completely understood. The tendency to become anxious is probably genetically inherited to some extent. Separation anxiety is more likely to occur in dogs that have never been left alone or in dogs that have been abandoned or had multiple homes. 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. Be prepared to give a refresher course in behavioral modification if problems reappear. Separation anxiety can be a life-threatening disorder in two ways. Dogs may seriously harm themselves (such as pawing at a window and the window shatters), or 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 surrendered and euthanized (put to death).

TREATMENT

Treatment involves eliminating the dog's fear of being left alone. A type of training known as behavioral modification is used for reducing the dog's anxiety. Antianxiety medications are also useful, especially in the more severe cases, but these medications should not be used as the only form of treatment because by themselves they are minimally effective at best. The best results are usually obtained with a combination of medication and training.

Antidepressant prescription drugs such as Elavil, Tofranil, Buspar, Anafranil, or Prozac may be prescribed by your veterinarian as treatment for separation anxiety. Do not prescribe them yourself, but rather seek your veterinarian's help or the help of a veterinarian specialized in behavioral disorders. These drugs take 3 to 5 weeks of administration every day to reach full effectiveness, so do not expect an immediate improvement. For pets that also have panic disorders, such as those that break out of kennels, tranquilizers may also be prescribed.

Behavior modification involves systematically exposing the dog to low-grade versions of anxiety situations in small graduated steps. Some important points include: leaving the house and arriving back home in as low-key a manner as possible to avoid overstimulating the dog, which increases anxiety. When leaving, give the dog a toy, such as a chew toy containing treats, and leave quietly. When you arrive back home, ignore the dog for the first few minutes rather than engaging in an excited greeting. After you have been home for a few minutes, a calm greeting and petting is appropriate. Systematic training to eliminate your dog's anxiety over being left alone is best undertaken with the help of a trainer who understands behavioral modification. The method involves using short (seconds to minutes) planned departures, where you return before your dog becomes anxious. With a very anxious dog, the first step is to make preparations as if you were going to leave, but then sitting down and not leaving. When the dog ceases to be anxious over your preparations, open the door, walk outside without shutting it, and come back inside. Eventually when he or she learns to tolerate this, you shut the door for a few seconds, open it, and come back inside. The training proceeds in small steps so that your dog learns to be calm at each step before you proceed to the next one. Once the dog can be left alone for over 1 hour without becoming anxious, absence for an entire day will usually be tolerated. As with medication therapy, this training program requires some time, but patience and persistence are rewarded with the dog that comfortably tolerates your absence.

DOs

- Institute a treatment program for separation anxiety as soon as it appears. Left untreated, the problem always gets worse.
- Be patient and stay with it. Behavioral modification requires a long-term commitment.

DON'Ts

- Do not punish your dog. Punishment will only worsen your pet's anxiety, and punishment for behavior that happened hours earlier would be ineffective in any case.

WHEN TO CALL YOUR VETERINARIAN

- If your dog is showing behaviors that seem to be related to fear of being alone, make an appointment with your veterinarian to have the problem evaluated.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Your veterinarian should be able to provide the names of knowledgeable trainers or veterinarians who specialize in the treatment of behavioral problems. The foremost specialists are veterinarians who are residency-trained, board-certified specialists in behavioral medicine (directory: www.veterinarybehaviorists.org).

Practice Stamp or Name & Address