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# Separation Anxiety in Dogs

Many of my clients seem to have dogs with separation anxiety. Can you provide an overview of diagnosis and treatment?

**S**eparation anxiety does seem to be prevalent in dogs. Studies have found that 14% to 17% of dogs may have separation anxiety.<sup>1</sup>

Separation anxiety is the occurrence of distress when the dog is separated from the person or persons to whom it is most attached. Common responses include destruction (especially at entrances and exits and of owner possessions), indoor elimination (unrelated to recent outdoor access), and vocalization (barking or whining). Other responses may include self-mutilation, excessive salivation, pacing, whining, anorexia, and other psychosomatic signs.<sup>1,2</sup> These behaviors may not occur at every departure, but the destruction and disruption can destroy the human-animal bond.<sup>3</sup>

## Causes

Although a single term is used to describe separation anxiety, there may be various presentations and differing underlying pathologies and causes.

Separation anxiety may be an inherited predisposition or related to selective breeding that has created dogs that are extremely socially oriented



Photo by Carlene Decker

toward humans and socially dependent upon them. Early onset may be related to early experiences, such as lack of proper detachment from the dam. Later onset may be related to changes in the social environment or may even be a learned behavior in which the dog realizes that certain situations signal a long-term absence of the owner(s).

Other animals seem to experience distress because something upsetting has occurred when they were home alone. Such dogs often also have noise or storm phobias and sensitivities that may generalize to all departures, not just those in which the original stimuli occur.<sup>4</sup> Finally, older animals often show increased anxiety and separation distress responses, perhaps due to aging and cognitive decline.<sup>5,6</sup>

## Diagnosis

A good physical examination and any laboratory work that might be indicated should always be

the first steps; medical illness often contributes to behavioral changes.

Diagnosis is based on historical information obtained during a behavioral consultation. Video- or audiotapes are useful to confirm the distress responses when the dog is home alone. The distress response typically occurs shortly after departure, often within 10 to 15 minutes, but the dog may continue to show distress unabated or it may wax and wane over a period of several hours.

The history should include information on the behavioral problem, pet-owner interaction, and other concurrent behavioral complaints. Questions should explore:

- The pet's response to the owner leaving and coming home
- The pet's behavior when it is alone and when the owner is home (In other words, do the

continues

signs of distress that the owner is interpreting as separation anxiety, such as barking and house soiling, also occur when the owner is home?)

- Information on the onset and circumstances of the problem
- How the pet and the owner interact on a daily basis in the form of attention, play, or training
- Whether the pet has a regular elimination pattern or if house soiling occurs at other times.

Always screen for aggression and ask about other fears, anxieties, or phobias the pet may have.

## Differential Diagnoses

Behaviors believed to result from separation anxiety can occur for other reasons, and these must be explored and ruled out before a definitive diagnosis can be made.

Destructive behavior can result from play; exploration; territorial responses; phobic responses to storms or noises; or frustration with barriers, such as crates. In these situations destruction occurs both when the owner is gone and when he or she is home. In some cases, the fear response (to noises or other stimuli) or territorial response is inhibited by the owner's presence and occurs only when the owner is absent.

Distinguishing poor house-training from separation-related soiling can be difficult if the owner does not witness outdoor elimination or does not search the house for soiled areas on a daily basis. A dog may eliminate indoors due to poor house-training, urinary tract problems, endocrine dysfunction, excitement or submission, the need to mark territory, fear, or cognitive dysfunction. However, inappropriate elimination resulting from these problems nearly always occurs when the owner is present as well.

Similarly, dogs commonly vocalize due to outside stimuli, social stimulation from other dogs, territorial displays, and play. However, distress vocalizations often sound different—they are higher in pitch and faster.

When a fearful or anxious dog encounters the triggering stimulus in the owner's absence, it may exhibit behaviors (such as destruction) that mimic separation anxiety.

## Treatment

Treatment plans generally have 7 components.

**1. Independence training:** Many dogs with separation anxiety remain close to the owner when the owner is home. Treatment is aimed at teaching the dog how to be more independent by decreasing following behavior as well as how to relax and settle on command. The owner is requested to ignore attention-seeking behaviors and give the dog attention only for being calm and quiet. Predictable daily interactions, exercise, and playtime also help to keep the dog calm and allow appropriate daily activities.

**2. Extinction of response (habituation) to departure cues:** An owner's routine before leaving often signals to the dog that departure is imminent, and many dogs begin to show signs of anxiety when this routine begins. The goal is to present these signals 1 to 3 times a day when they are not associated with departure. For example, an owner may get his keys, walk around the house, and then put the keys down without ever departing. The goal is (hopefully) for the dog to learn that keys do not always signal departure.

**3. Counterconditioning to departure:** In some cases if the dog is provided a pleasurable, alternative task before the owner's departure, it can be used to change the underlying emotional state from anxiety to relaxation. Often this is accomplished by offering the dog a food toy that has been stuffed with something delectable. It is very important that this treat or toy be given to the dog at times other than departures, otherwise it too may become a signal of departure.

**4. Changing departure and return protocols:** Departures and returns must be low-key and calm. Owners are advised to ignore the pet for 10 to 15 minutes before departure and on return. On return, they should not interact with



## at a glance

- Increase independence from owner by decreasing dog's following of owner.
- Ensure regular, scheduled interactions and playtime.
- Interact with pet when it is calm.
- Leave a favorite food or stuffed toy on departure.
- Keep departures and returns low key.
- Use pheromones and medication to promote calm behaviors.

the dog until it is calm, although they may let it outdoors to eliminate.

**5. Training departures:** These are departures specifically designed to teach the dog how to be left home alone. They are not usually begun until the dog no longer responds to departure cues with anxiety. They are discussed in detail elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

**6. Pheromones:** Pheromone products (CEVA Animal Health, [www.ceva.com](http://www.ceva.com)) can be useful in some individuals to help diminish the anxiety associated with departure.

**7. Medication:** Two medications are approved for use in dogs for the treatment of separation anxiety: clomipramine (Clomicalm; [www.ah.novartis.com](http://www.ah.novartis.com)) and fluoxetine (Reconcile; [www.lillypet.com](http://www.lillypet.com)). Each product has been shown to effectively treat separation anxiety when used in conjunction with a behavior modification plan.<sup>7, 8</sup>

Good history taking, accurate diagnosis, and a well-thought-out treatment plan—often in conjunction with medication—can help many pets with separation anxiety recover from the disorder and remain comfortably at home in the absence of the owner. ■

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references, contacts, and appendices.

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