

Effects of the COVID-19 Lockdown on the Human–Animal Bond

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In the literature

Bowen J, García E, Darder P, Argüelles J, Fatjó J. The effects of the Spanish COVID-19 lockdown on people, their pets, and the human-animal bond. *J Vet Behav.* 2020;40:75-91.

FROM THE PAGE ...

Most countries responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with a lockdown that confined humans to their home, changing the daily life of pets. These changes were likely to create anxiety in pets and their owners.¹

This study looked at the effects of mandated confinement on pets using statistical methods. When the survey was conducted, mean duration of confinement was 3.2 weeks; 44.6% of pet owners indicated their quality of life was slightly worse, and 11.4% noted quality of life had improved. Of the respondents, 74.3% felt the presence of a pet helped them during confinement. However, some pets showed behavior changes associated with the prolonged presence of humans in the home. Of particular concern, pets of owners with quality-of-life concerns were also likely to have worse quality of life.

There have been anecdotal reports of cats becoming increasingly aggressive toward owners during the pandemic. However, responses in this study do not align with these reports; 1.6% of cats reportedly displayed more aggression, 3.6% became less aggressive, and 16.5% had no change. The frequency of most problem behaviors in cats stayed the same or decreased slightly and included house soiling and urine marking.

Dogs were slightly more likely than cats to have worsening behavior problems (as recorded for 8 of 10 behaviors included in the study); increased vocalization was the most noticeable. Behavior in 11.8% of dogs worsened when dogs were left alone, which—along with increased attention-seeking behavior in both dogs and cats—may indicate a possible increase in cases of separation anxiety when human activities outside the home return to prepandemic levels.²

Prolongation of the pandemic, resurgence of COVID-19 cases, and differences in how countries manage their response will affect data gathered by other researchers. This article may provide some early baseline information and a comparably rigorous statistical format to help future researchers.

... TO YOUR PATIENTS

Key pearls to consider in practice:

- 1** The most significant behavior changes noted in dogs during the COVID-19 lockdown included increased or annoying vocalization, problems when left alone, and aggression toward other dogs when on walks. Both dogs and cats exhibited increased attention-seeking behaviors and fear of loud or sudden noise. House soiling improved in 5.6% and worsened in 2.8% of cats. Cats were also noted to be more relaxed.
- 2** Dogs did best when they had outdoor access and were taken on frequent walks. Cats living in multicat households also reportedly did better.
- 3** Dogs reportedly had worse quality of life when owners showed increased emotional closeness and reported increased frequency of getting angry at the dog, as well as when all members of the household were home. Cats reportedly also had worse quality of life when owners showed increased emotional closeness or when owners reported they were anxious.

References

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2. Cost B. Dogs could get extreme separation anxiety when quarantine ends, experts say. New York Post website. <https://nypost.com/2020/04/21/dogs-could-get-separation-anxiety-when-coronavirus-quarantine-ends-experts>. Published April 2020. Accessed September 2020.



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