

SEPARATION ANXIETY

What is separation anxiety?

Anxiety is an emotional state that occurs when an animal anticipates a threat or a danger. In some situations this heightened state of alertness has survival advantages – when walking through a jungle full of tigers it pays to be alert to a rustling in the bushes! Unfortunately many dogs are anxious even when no genuine threat exists and their resultant behaviour can have severe consequences for both themselves and their owners.

Dogs that suffer from separation anxiety can be completely normal when in the company of people but when they are left alone become stressed and may even panic. These dogs often have an abnormal over-attachment to people which can be seen as over-the-top attention-seeking behaviour. Their sense of being safe and secure becomes entirely dependent on being close to people and some of these dogs will attempt to be *really* close to their owners, even to the point of trying to lean on or sit on them at every opportunity.

What are the signs of separation anxiety?

Signs of separation anxiety will vary according to the individual dog but can include the following:

- distress at the owner doing any activity that may indicate they are about to leave (i.e. picking up car keys, putting on shoes, etc)
- vocalising (barking, whining, howling)
- escaping or attempting to escape
- destructive behaviour
- house-soiling
- pacing, panting, salivating
- refusal to eat

How do I know if my dog suffers from separation anxiety?

Many of the signs of separation anxiety are not specific. Dogs may destroy toys and furniture because they gain enjoyment from doing so. A dog may escape from the yard because it is scared by a thunderstorm. An accident may occur in the house because a dog has not been fully house trained.

What makes diagnosing separation anxiety difficult is that the signs only occur when people are absent. If you think that your dog may be suffering from this condition, it is always a good idea to set up a video camera or webcam and monitor what your dog is doing when you are not there. This is also a really good way of monitoring response to treatment.

What causes separation anxiety?

As with all behavioural problems, multiple factors contribute to the development of separation anxiety in a dog – namely genetics, environment and previous learning.

Temperament is a heritable trait and some dogs are born with a tendency to be anxious. These dogs are at high risk of developing separation anxiety or other behavioural problems at some stage during their lives.

A traumatic episode experienced when left alone may cause a dog to develop separation anxiety. What a dog considers 'traumatic' is variable but in a dog with an anxious personality could be something as simple as a severe thunderstorm.

A change in circumstances can also trigger separation anxiety. Dogs that have become accustomed to the constant presence of people (particularly if this occurs when they are a puppy) may fail to adjust if later in life they are suddenly required to spend long periods on their own. Changes in environment, such as moving house, are frequently associated with the onset of separation anxiety.

What should I do if my dog is suffering from separation anxiety?

Treatment of separation anxiety focuses on building the dog's confidence and independence.

- Firstly, ensure that the dog is kept in a secure area as dogs suffering from this condition may try to escape when left alone and are at risk of injury while roaming.
- Try gently encouraging the dog to spend time away from people by providing enjoyable activities in parts of the garden or house away from people. When left alone dogs should be given meaningful activities such as a bone to chew, toys to play with or a range of treat-dispensing devices such as Kongs.
- Training exercises that promote calm behaviour and reward the dog for being a distance from the owner are also worthwhile. Sending the dog to a mat from a distance or practicing stays are a good way of doing this.
- Structuring interactions with the dogs in the household to stop attention-seeking behaviour is also important. This involves ignoring any approaches by the dog for attention and asking the dog for a simple, calm behaviour before any pat or cuddle.
- Creating a location that your pet feels secure in can help some dogs. This may involve allowing your dog access to the inside of the house while you are out or providing a crate or other comfortable area for them to retreat to.
- Desensitisation to leaving routines is a time-consuming process but is worthwhile in some dogs.
- Punishment needs to be avoided wherever possible as it is only likely to result in the underlying anxiety, and hence the problem, becoming worse. Punishing dogs for destructive behaviour found on returning home is a classic example of what not to do.
- Anti-anxiety medications and sedatives are also useful in the treatment of dogs with separation anxiety. To find out if these would be appropriate for your pet, contact your local veterinarian.

If your pet is suffering from a severe anxiety problem or you are not making any progress with treatment it is worth considering a consultation with a veterinary behaviourist. Your regular veterinarian should be able to refer you to someone in your area.