

## **Separation Anxiety**

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One out of every six dogs may suffer from canine separation anxiety. These dogs panic and suffer from anxiety when left alone. Often these dogs behave perfectly when family members are home yet appear guilty when family members come home. Separation anxiety may be seen in young dogs who never fully adapt to being separated from their owners, and in dogs with other anxiety disorders such as noise phobias; it can also develop after a change in the household or schedule.

### **Diagnosis and Clinical Signs**

Diagnosis of separation anxiety typically includes one or more signs of destructiveness, excessive vocalization and house soiling. The hallmark of separation anxiety is that these signs occur immediately following departure and may be most dramatic following unexpected or unusual departures. If any of these undesirable behaviors occur when family members are with the dog, causes other than separation anxiety should first be ruled out. Evidence of destructive behaviors or house soiling would be obvious when family members return home but excessive vocalization, which ranges from whining to howling, may not be detected except when severe enough to disturb neighbors.

Destructive behaviors are generally associated with escape attempts or destruction near doors or windows where the family routinely exits. Destruction due to separation anxiety may be associated with personal items of specific family members, but getting into the trash or chewing house hold items may be related to boredom rather than separation anxiety. House soiling (urine and stool accidents) that is due to separation anxiety will occur shortly after people leave, and that should be distinguished from when it happens after long periods of time. Video monitoring is useful to characterize signs and severity of separation anxiety.

Additional signs supporting a diagnosis of separation anxiety are ones that begin when the owner prepares to depart; when the dog needs to be with someone at all times and follows people when the owners are at home; salivation; and little or no interest in food when the owner leaves.

### **Management**

Some dogs are so severely affected they simply cannot be left alone without injuring themselves during escape attempts. Avoid leaving a severely affected dog alone. Some dogs benefit from being with a human companion or placed in dog day care. Some dogs will adapt to being confined to a crate, a specific room, or a level of the house such as a basement, while some dogs do better with free access to the entire house. Some dogs with separation anxiety may be less anxious when crated or confined because they find some predictable assurance from this routine, but many are more panicked. Barrier anxiety or frustration may result in panic and destruction at barriers such as crates, doors, windows or walls.

### **Pharmacological, Pheromotherapy and Botanical Interventions**

Medications require many weeks to achieve the desired anti-anxiety effects: **clomipramine** (Clomicalm®, Novartis Animal Health) and **fluoxetine** (Reconcile®, Elanco) are both veterinary approved medications that are useful for treatment of canine separation anxiety in combination with a behavior modification program. Advantages to use of veterinary-approved products include knowing the predictable degree and rate at which a drug is absorbed, taste, and access to expert veterinary support.

Rapid acting, short-duration anxiolytics (anti-anxiety medications) such as benzodiazepines may be used to minimize anxiety at people's departure. Peak effect and duration of anxiolytic effect varies between benzodiazepines. **Diazepam** (Valium) often reaches peak effect in 20 minutes and lasts 1 to 2 hours, and **alprazolam** (Xanax) reaches peak effect in 30 to 45 minutes and lasts 1 to 3 hours. Pheromone therapy with D.A.P. ® Dog Appeasing Pheromones in collar, spray or diffuser forms may reduce anxiety and promote a feeling of well being.

Consult your veterinarian for a complete assessment and behavior modification program as each case of separation anxiety is unique. For severe cases, combination therapy may be indicated, so a dog may be on fluoxetine for reduction of general anxiety, alprazolam for departures and pheromone for natural anxiety reduction. Early or careful diagnosis of dogs displaying a low level of anxiety may benefit from natural or botanical interventions such as Anxitane®, Harmonease®, or Composure®; these interventions have the advantage of being readily available as a non-pharmaceutical supplement, but as with pharmaceuticals a combination of anxiolytic support and behavior modification is most successful. Owners should seek support of a veterinarian who will recommend the best level of intervention for their dog based on a diagnosis and comprehensive treatment program.

## Treatment

Successful resolution of the symptoms of separation anxiety often requires a complex intervention program that includes management, enrichment and anxiolytics. Basics include providing for a dog's social and exercise requirements, and teaching a dog how to relax and accept some time without attention. Family members should practice predictable and non-emotional departures and greetings. Of course, punishment never alleviates anxiety and has no place in treatment of separation anxiety. Encouraging behaviors such as engaging in food puzzle toys or safe retreat to a comfortable resting area provide alternative behaviors.

Dogs suffering from separation anxiety are panicked, fearful and traumatized when left alone and teaching them acceptable and alternative behaviors to use when they are alone is central to the behavior modification program. Predeparture anxiety is often associated with signs the family members are preparing to leave (handling of keys, mobile phones or shoes). Desensitization can be as simple as picking up keys or briefcase and setting them back down without leaving. Counter conditioning may be accomplished by picking up keys and the briefcase while giving a treat. With repetition we teach the dog that departure cues may be pleasant and are not always associated with departures. Food puzzle toys can be given at departure times to distract the dog and counter condition the negative association of family departures.

## Expected Outcome

Separation anxiety may persist lifelong but may be successfully managed or minimized with appropriate behavior modification therapy. Relapses are common when routines are disrupted by vacations, moving to a new home or variations in the family's school or work schedules. Normal seasonal variations in routine may upset dogs with separation anxiety. If your dog has signs that you feel might be due to separation anxiety, see your veterinarian to confirm the diagnosis, dispense the appropriate medication and give you the guidance to successfully implement the behavior plan.

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