

Separation Anxiety

Dogs bond strongly to humans. They can learn to be alone for moderate periods but it doesn't come naturally. It's not surprising, then, that about one in five dogs show symptoms of separation anxiety when alone: uncontrollable urinating or defecating; destruction of furniture, walls, windows or flooring; self-injury while attempting to escape kennels; vomiting and drooling; or long periods of barking and crying.



Some dogs with separation anxiety are fine when left alone in the car or when the owner takes out the garbage—they've learned the difference between "long absence" scenarios and "short absence" scenarios. Others are anxious in all contexts.

The degree of anxiety shown by some dogs with separation anxiety is consistent with that of panic attacks in people. This is the key take-away if you're struggling to cope with and make sense of your dog's behavior. Dogs with separation anxiety are not misbehaving out of boredom, spite or for fun, and scolding them for what they do when alone will not solve—and could even worsen—the problem.

RISK FACTORS

We don't yet know what causes separation anxiety. Risk factors that increase the likelihood that a dog will have separation anxiety (but may not cause it) include noise and thunderstorm phobias, a stay in an animal shelter, or a major family transition such as a re-homing, a move, a divorce or a new baby.

In recent years, research has ruled out a few popular myths about the causes of separation anxiety: coddling or spoiling, letting a dog sleep in the owner's bed or couch, or a lack of structure or discipline.

TREATMENT

Luckily, separation anxiety does respond to treatment. The gold standard is systematic desensitization to change the dog's emotional reaction to departure and being alone. The track record for this technique is excellent, but you'll need a professional to design and coach you through a program.

A consultation with a veterinarian or veterinary behaviorist may also be recommended to see if anti-anxiety medications can be used in conjunction with the systematic desensitization.

Many dogs with separation anxiety also benefit from increased enrichment. Although they are not stand-alone treatments, an increase in exercise and problem-solving can help your dog rest quietly when alone. Give dogs both physical exercise and mental work to do. Play fetch, play hide and seek with his toys, teach him tricks, get involved in a sport like agility, let him play with other dogs, or stuff his food into Kongs. Again, these strategies alone are unlikely to resolve your dog's anxiety, but they will boost the effectiveness of training and medication.

Emotionally draining and distressing for families, separation anxiety is one of the leading causes for relinquishment and re-homing, so don't wait to seek the help of a qualified dog trainer or veterinary behaviorist.

For more information about separation anxiety and its treatment, visit www.malenademartini.com.

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