

Separation Anxiety in Dogs

Dogs that have separation anxiety will exhibit signs of stress a short time after they are left alone, typically less than an hour after their owner has left. The most common issues seen with dogs that have separation anxiety are:

- Digging or chewing at walls or windows
- Barking or crying
- Urinating or defecating inside, even when they are housebroken

Even dogs that do not typically show anxiety when left alone may do so after a sudden change in their routine, such as a move to a new home, or when their owner has been home for a long time and suddenly is not, such as starting a new job.

How do I know if my dog has separation anxiety?

Dogs that have the following attributes may be experiencing separation anxiety:

- Problem behaviors occur every time your dog is left alone, not sporadically
- Your dog seems panicked when you begin your routine to leave the house: pacing, panting, following you around
- Your dog seems panicked when you get home and is allowed to greet you



What to do if your dog has separation anxiety

When your dog is experiencing a mild separation anxiety issue, the following may help resolve these issues:

- Make your departures and arrivals from the home uneventful and calm. Do not fuss over the dog when you are leaving, make it no big deal that you are coming or going.
- Create a routine so that your dog has an expectation of what will happen. For example, feed your dog, take them outside, turn the radio on, give the dog a safe toy, and then leave. Make sure your leaving routine takes the same amount of time, setting expectations for your leaving.

For more severe cases of anxiety, you may need to change your dog's association with being alone. This can be done by doing practice sessions of departure activities and leaving your dog alone for short times to build up their tolerance. We recommend the following:

- Engage in your normal departure activities (getting your keys, putting on your coat), and then sit back down. Repeat this step until your dog shows no stress responses.
- Open your door and then sit back down. Again, repeat until your dog shows no signs of stress.
- Step outside, close the door, and then come right back inside. Build up the amount of time that you are outside.
- When your dog is comfortable with you leaving for 30 seconds at a time, you can add in a cue phrase such as "be right back" when you leave. Remember, do not make a big deal out of your return. It should be a low-key greeting.

When working to modify behavior, practice a few 10-minute training sessions throughout the day.

Build up the time you are gone until you are able to do 30-60 minutes at a time. Once you get to an hour, you generally have successfully managed your dog's separation anxiety. Remember that most separation anxiety presents itself in that first hour after you are gone.

This process will need to be done slowly for dogs with severe anxiety so remember: baby steps! The time it takes to modify your dog's reaction to you leaving is dependent on the severity of their anxiety.