

What does separation anxiety mean?

Dogs with separation anxiety may bark, howl, be destructive and urinate and/or defecate in the house when left alone. The behaviors hardly ever occur when an owner is with the dog. All of the behaviors occur soon after the dog is left alone and may (barking) go on for hours. The destructive behavior tends to be centered near doors and windows. Dogs often chew doorways and windowsills or pull up carpeting by the front door.

Other behavior problems to rule out

Before concluding that your dog has separation anxiety, it's important to rule out the following behavior problems: submissive/excitement urination, incomplete housetraining, urine marking and boredom. Remember that it's normal for dogs to be anxious for the first few weeks in a new home. Establishing a routine will help them learn that you will always be coming back home to them.

What can I do to help my dog with separation anxiety?

- **Give your dog a KONG before you leave.** Although many anxious dogs won't eat when left alone, some will, and when they do, their anxiety is reduced as they focus on the challenge of extracting food from a toy. Try a KONG toy filled with either cheese spread or peanut butter and treats. If you find that your dog is reliably eating the KONG, try freezing it to make it more challenging and last longer.
- **Turn on the TV or radio.** Some dogs find comfort in hearing human voices when left alone.
- **Natural remedies.** Try Rescue Remedy for Pets and/or a DAP (pheromones) collar.
- **Leave your scent.** Some dogs are comforted by the scent of their owner. Take a dirty t-shirt (something "fragrant" – like a gym shirt or a t-shirt you've slept in) and tie it in knots. Leave it with your dog when you leave. Don't be surprised if he chews it, so pick a shirt that you don't mind losing!
- **Exercise your dog before you leave.** Some dogs are able to handle alone time better when they are tired. Play fetch in the backyard or go for a long walk before leaving the house.
- **Confinement vs. Free-Range.** Some dogs do best in a crate while others do best with more space. If you choose to leave your dog uncrated, try confining him to the room where the family spends the most time. Be sure to remove anything you don't want chewed, like pillows, shoes, the TV remote, cords/cables, glasses, etc. If you choose this option, you would do best to practice short departures (see below) before trusting your new dog to spend hours alone.
- **Consider doggie daycare or other care options.** If your dog is social with other dogs, consider taking him to doggie daycare so he can be around people and other dogs all day. Or, if your dog prefers more relaxing environments, check with your friends and neighbors to see if they would like some company during the day.
- **Talk to your vet.** Some dogs benefit from anti-anxiety medication. Your vet will be able to help you determine if your dog is a good candidate for prescription medication support.

How can I teach my dog to be alone?

- **Practice short departures.** On your dog's first day in your home, start to leave the house for very short times. Don't make a big deal about leaving or returning. First, just go in and out the door. If your dog doesn't panic, take the trash outside or pick up your mail. Then, leave the house for 5-minute intervals. If you take your car to work, make sure you drive your car away. Over the first two days, try to progress up to 30 minutes. Make sure you allow your dog to relax between departures. If your dog panics, wait a couple of hours before doing another departure and make it short. The goal is to have your dog relax when left alone.
- **Read up.** "Don't Leave Me! Step by Step Help for Your Dog's Separation Anxiety" by Nicole Wilde or "I'll be Home Soon: How to Prevent and Treat Separation Anxiety" by Patricia McConnell. Both books are available at Amazon.com.