

Behaviour Tips: *Help! My dog cannot be left home alone!*

Do you ever return home to torn open garbage, ripped up cushions, or a scratched door frame? Have you ever found evidence that your dog has urinated, defecated or salivated on the floor while you were away? Does your dog pace, whimper, hide, or have other changes in their behaviour when you are about to leave your home? If you have answered “yes” to any of these questions it *may* indicate that your dog has some separation anxiety.

Separation anxiety is one of the most common behavioural problems reported in dogs. Studies have suggested that separation anxiety occurs in up to 13-17% of dogs, which means over 12 million dogs in Canada & the US may be affected by this condition!

What is separation anxiety? Separation anxiety is a true behavioural pathology where a dog experiences actual distress when actually separated from their owner or when “virtually” separated (i.e., if there is some barrier such as a door between the dog and their human but the human is present). These dogs may display behaviours and signs such as: *property destruction, escape attempts, excessive salivation, shaking/trembling, vocalization (like whining, howling, or barking), inappropriate urination, diarrhea, and/or vomiting.* Signs of separation anxiety do not just occur after you have left, but may start as soon as the dog realizes that you might be leaving. Often, routine activities such as putting on your coat, tying your shoes, grabbing your keys or even having your alarm clock go off can signal to your dog that you are leaving, which may trigger their anxiety. Some signs you may notice as you are getting ready to leave are: *pac*ing, *whimpering*, *lip-licking*, *hiding*, *yawning*, and *other changes in their behaviour.*



Destruction while owners aren't home

Who is affected by it? Separation anxiety is seen in dogs of all breeds and ages. Regardless of sex or neuter status, any dog can be affected. Dogs that come from shelters have a higher risk of developing separation anxiety possibly because their previous human was not attached to and abandoned them. Adopted dogs should be closely monitored for signs of separation anxiety so that they can get help early if they need it. Early help is the best help.

How do you know if your dog has separation anxiety? You'll want to have a consultation with your family veterinarian where he/she will discuss signs you are noticing at home. They might have you fill out a detailed questionnaire to gather more information.

Helpful hints: To prepare for your visit, try to observe your dog every time you leave the house. Take note of any anxiety signals like the ones mentioned above. When you return after being away, look for any signs of destruction or inappropriate house soiling.

The best option is to video your dog as you are leaving the house and while you're away. Have a camera set up inside your home where the is likely to be so you can see what is happening when you're gone! You can present this footage to your veterinarian so she/he can get a better understanding of what's occurring.

Please note: It is important to understand that some of the signs and behaviours displayed with separation anxiety can look similar to certain medical conditions (for example, urinating in the house may be a sign

of separation anxiety or may be due to a medical condition like a bladder infection). For this reason, your veterinarian will want to rule out any medical causes for the behaviours before a diagnosis of separation anxiety can be made. In case medication is needed your veterinarian will also likely recommend some lab work.

What are the next steps? Once your family veterinarian suggests that your dog has separation anxiety, then they will likely discuss ways to manage it, which often include behavioural modification and medication.

Unfortunately, dogs that have separation anxiety are more likely to also experience other behavioural disorders, such as noise or thunderstorm phobias, so it is important that you work with your family vet to identify *all anxiety and/or behaviour problems.* Sometimes, if multiple behavioural disorders are present, or your dog's separation anxiety is severe, your vet may recommend a visit to a veterinary behavioural specialist, who can create a detailed treatment plan specifically suited to your dog. **Treatment plans often include a combination of medication & behavioural modification.**

Medication: There are a variety of medications that are available to help manage separation anxiety and the selection will depend on the severity of the problem in addition to any other anxiety or behavioural issues your dog may have. Some medications that your veterinarian or a specialist may discuss with you may include: alprazolam, gabapentin, clomipramine (Clomicalm), fluoxetine (Reconcile), and OTM dexmedetomidine (Sileo). The last 3 are licensed for use in dogs and Reconcile and Clomicalm are licensed to treat separation anxiety in dogs. Other options exist and it may take a few tries to find the medication that works best for your dog. Regardless of the specific medication your veterinarian may recommend, it is important to realize that medication is only part of the solution. Behavioural modification is a significant component to any treatment plan.

Behavioural Modification: Behaviour modification can help you to slowly desensitize the dog to your absence. You can start by giving rewards to your dog for displaying calm behaviours. For instance, whenever your dog is calmly lying in her bed, you can praise her. Rewards can be yummy treats, petting, and simply praise, but using multiple types of rewards helps. This positive reinforcement shows that “being calm” is a good thing. When dogs can learn to remain calm during brief periods of time, we can start to teach them to be calm during very short and then longer absences. Studies have shown that dogs that are calmly talked to and petted when sitting before departures are calmer during them. Dogs treated with medication and behavioural modification get better.

It is extremely important to note that *you should NEVER use punishment-based training methods.* Studies have shown that punishment-based/aversive training can actually create even more anxiety and fear in anxious dogs and often exacerbate separation-related behaviours. Please do not punish your dog for house soiling, destruction, and/or other anxiety-driven behaviours. It is much more effective to use positive reinforcement of the behaviour than you want to see (i.e., calmly relaxing).

A couple more tips! When you leave, it can be a good idea to provide your dog with food toys (such as a Kong filled with peanut butter). Not only will this give your dog a task to concentrate on, but the toy acts as positive reinforcement during your absence. This may allow them to associate happy, positive feelings with your absence to replace their fear and anxiety. Truly scared dogs cannot eat, but if your dog starts to use the Kong, she is improving.

Don't forget, your dog should have an opportunity to release some energy throughout the day! Taking your dog for a walk or swim, or playing indoors might help them to calm down more quickly when it is time to do so.

Although these tips are helpful, please discuss any behavioural/medical concerns with your local veterinarian. For all cases where you still have concerns, seek specialist services (www.dacvb.org). At AVC you can contact the AVC Behavioural Medicine Service (AVCBehaviouralMed@upe.ca).