

“Don’t Leave Me Home Alone!”

Diagnosis and Treatment of Separation Anxiety in Dogs

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Separation anxiety disorder

- Excessive and recurrent distress associated with separation from home or major attachment figure
 - Children
 - Adolescents
 - Adults
- Dogs and Cats
 - Emotional distress
 - Left alone in any environment
 - Absence of favorite person
 - Absence of pet companion

Separation anxiety in dogs

- Social species
- Dogs show attachment to human companions
- Normal for puppies to show distress when separated from mother
- Normal for some level of distress when adults separated from companions
- Why do some dogs develop SAS?
- Genetic factors
- Early experience
- Degree of human attachment
- Traumatic separation
- Sociality of individual

Signs of separation anxiety

- Signs occur when home alone only
- Vocalization
 - Howling, barking, whining
- Elimination
 - Urination and/or bowel movements
- Destructive behavior
 - Chewing, scratching, digging
 - Owner belongings?
- Departure anxiety
 - Clingy, following behaviors as owner prepares to leave
 - May even see aggression

- Senses departure cues
- Excessive greeting behaviors
 - Difficulty settling down when owner returns home
- Escape behaviors
 - Escaping crate, windows, doors, etc.
- Hypersalivation
 - Excessive drooling when home alone
 - Puddles of saliva in or around crate
- Self-injury
 - Tooth fracture, gum laceration, toenail injury
 - Typically a result of panicked escape attempts
 - Excessive grooming
- Anorexia
 - Unwilling to eat in owner's absence
 - Animals will not eat when they feel threatened, anxious or unsafe

Ruling out differential diagnoses

- Houstraining problems
- Noise or thunderstorm fears
- Boredom/lack of appropriate outlets
- Territorial aggression
- Confinement anxiety
- Medical problem
- Differential diagnoses

Houstraining problems

- Does the animal also eliminate when owners are home?

Noise or thunderstorm fears

- Do the owners notice nervous behaviors during storms/fireworks/loud noise when they are home?
- Did the problem start on a storm day?
- Is the problem sporadic?

Boredom/lack of appropriate outlets

- Young, active dogs
- Destruction also occurs in presence of owners

Territorial aggression

- Behavior when owners are home?
- Focused on front windows?

Confinement anxiety

- How does the dog do when home alone and not crated?

Medical problem

- Epilepsy, incontinence, dementia

- Acute onset in geriatric patient?

How to rule in SAS

- Thorough behavioral history
- Medical work up
 - Minimum database, especially if elimination problems reported, acute onset, or geriatric patient
- VIDEO RECORDING!
 - When home alone
 - In crate and out of crate

Predisposing factors

- Traumatic separation
 - Strays, shelter and rescue animals
 - Abnormal bonding?
- Sudden change in routine
 - Owner returns to work
 - Child moves away to college
- Major household changes
 - Death or departure of family member
- Greyhounds?

Rescued greyhounds

- Inexperience with being left alone in a home environment
- Dramatic change in routine/environment
- Highly social breed
 - Strong owner attachment
- Inadequate environmental socialization
 - Stairs?
 - Flooring?

Treatment

- Encourage independence
- Create a safe environment
- Downplay departures and arrivals
- Decrease overall anxiety

Encourage independence

- Relaxation exercises
 - “Settle mat”
 - Down-stay exercises
 - Food toys - tethered
 - Do not encourage clingy behavior
 - “Social Skills”

Create a safe environment

- To crate or not to crate?

- Can be cause of severe injury
- Confinement exacerbates separation distress
- Some dogs panic if crate removed....
- Typically avoid confinement if safe
- Block off areas that may be dangerous
- Remove valuable items
- Enrichment
 - Feed via puzzle toys
 - Kongs, Twist & Treat, Kibble Nibble, Dog Pyramid
 - Canned food FROZEN, peanut butter, kibble, treats
 - When alone AND when owner home
 - Enrichment
- Appropriate items to destroy
 - Phone books, newspaper, pizza boxes, stuffed toys
- Free-choice water – freeze it if needed
- Background noise
 - White noise, classical music
- Remember to offer enrichment toys, play music/white noise, items to destroy at times when owner IS HOME, as well as when owner is away
- Do not want enrichment to become a departure cue!
- NO PUNISHMENT for undesirable behaviors when home alone
 - Will not associate punishment with act
 - Will increase anxiety
 - Creates fear of owner
 - May exacerbate problem
 - Coprophagia?

Downplay departures and arrivals

- Neutral interactions 30 minutes prior
- Keep occupied during departure routine
- Prepare as much as possible ahead of time
- Avoid exposure to major triggers
 - Keys
 - Shoes
 - Coat
 - Downplay departures and arrivals
- Set up enrichment toys, tethered
- “Sneak out”
- Different door
- Block sounds of departure
 - White noise, classical music
 - Neutral interactions upon arrival

Decrease overall anxiety

- Exercise
 - Preferably BEFORE departures
 - Long-brisk walks

- Energy outlet
- Typically not enough by itself
- Pheromones
- D.A.P. products
 - Diffuser, spray, collar

Drug therapy

- Standing drug
 - Typically SSRI, or TCA
 - Increase serotonin levels in CNS
 - Daily anti-anxiety, takes 4-6 weeks to see full effect
 - Continue until reach goal, then maintain an additional 3-6 months
 - Gradual wean, 25% per 2 weeks
- Be aware of drug interactions
 - Tramadol, Promeris, Amitraz, Preventic collar...
- Clomicalm[®]
 - Clomipramine hydrochloride
 - Tricyclic anti-depressant
 - 1-3mg/kg BID target dose
 - Side effects
 - Anticholinergic effects possible
 - Vomiting, constipation, urine retention, dry mouth
 - Anti-histamine effects
 - Mild sedation
 - May offer greater “calming” of behavior
 - Contraindications
 - Seizures
 - Male breeding dogs
 - Renal or hepatic disease
- Reconcile[®]
 - Fluoxetine hydrochloride
 - Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor
 - 0.5-2.0mg/kg SID
 - Side effects
 - Decreased appetite
 - Lethargy
 - Gastrointestinal upset (vomiting, diarrhea)
 - Contraindications
 - Seizures
 - Existing poor appetite
 - Renal/hepatic disease
- Benzodiazepines
 - Short-term sedative/anxiolytics
 - Valium, Xanax, Tranxene, Klonopin

- - Anxiolysis, sedation, muscle relaxation, increase appetite within 30 minutes
 - Given on departure days only
- Goal is to wean off of short-term drugs within 6-8 weeks
- Trazodone
 - Serotonin antagonist and reuptake inhibitor (SARI)
 - Works synergistically with SSRIs and TCAs
 - 1-5mg/kg BID, or PRN, not exceeding 300mg per dose, or 600mg daily
 - Trazodone
 - Side effects
 - Anti-histamine effects
 - Sedation
 - Priapism? (Humans)
 - Contraindications
 - Same as any serotonin-enhancing drug
 - Can be used in place of or in addition to benzodiazepines if needed

Prevention

- Teach independence early
- Set up an environment for success
- Keep a consistent routine
- Encourage time alone on days when home
- Avoid excitement around arrivals and departures
- Discuss for every newly adopted shelter or rescue dog!

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