



# Separation Anxiety Syndrome

## Basics

### OVERVIEW

- A distress response of dogs (occasionally cats) separated from the person or persons to whom they are most attached
- The separation may be real (the person is gone from the home environment) or perceived (the pet is just located away from the person, as being in a different room)
- The resulting distress may lead to episodes of destruction, vocalization, and elimination
- Separation anxiety is a subset of separation-related problems that may have different underlying motivations, including fear, anxiety, over-attachment to the person(s), and lack of appropriate stimulation or interactions

### GENETICS

- None known

### SIGNALMENT/DESCRIPTION OF PET

#### Species

- Primarily dogs; speculated that 7–28% of companion dogs experience some degree of separation anxiety syndrome
- Possible in cats

#### Mean Age and Range

- Any age, most commonly in dogs greater than 6 months of age; number of cases may increase in dogs greater than 8 years of age

#### Predominant Sex

- None recorded

### SIGNS/OBSERVED CHANGES IN THE PET

- Destruction, vocalization (whining, howling, barking), and indoor elimination are reported most commonly; not diagnostic for separation anxiety by themselves.
- Destruction often targets windows and doors and/or the person's possessions
- Other signs include behavioral depression, lack of appetite (anorexia), drooling, hiding, shaking, panting, pacing, attempts to prevent the person's departure, and self-trauma from lick lesions; diarrhea and vomiting are occasionally noted
- Signs of strong pet-person attachment may be present; usually excessive attention-seeking behaviors and



following behaviors; excessive, excited, and prolonged greeting behavior upon the person's return, regardless of the length of the absence

- In cats, elimination problems in the person's absence may be linked to separation-related anxiety
- Separation distress behavior(s) occurs regardless of the length of the person's absence and tend to occur within 30 minutes of the person's departure
- Specific triggers may be identified, such as the person getting keys, putting on outer garments, or packing the car; triggers are situations or things to which the pet reacts, leading to separation anxiety
- May occur on every departure and absence or only with atypical departures (such as after-work, evening, or weekend departures); the reverse pattern also may be seen; may also be linked to fear-inducing stimuli such as storms, certain loud noises
- In cats, elimination problems in the owner's absence may be linked to separation-related anxiety
- Physical examination usually is normal
- Injuries possible in escape attempts or while engaging in destructive activities
- Skin lesions from excessive licking
- Rare cases of dehydration from drooling or diarrhea due to stress

## CAUSES

- Specific causes are unknown
- Speculated causes include the following:
  - ♦ Improper socialization to the person's departure and absence
  - ♦ Lack of appropriate pet-person interactions
  - ♦ Prolonged contact with humans, without learning to be alone
  - ♦ Improper or incomplete early separation from the mother dog (known as a “bitch” or “dam”)
  - ♦ Traumatic episodes during the person's absence or change in household routine
  - ♦ Decline in thinking, learning, and memory, frequently associated with aging (known as “cognitive decline”) or medical issues including hormonal imbalance, pain

## RISK FACTORS

- Suspected, but not proven, risk factors include adoption from humane shelters, extended time with preferred person (such as during vacation or illness), boarding, lack of detachment when young
- Senior pets
- Possible correlation between separation anxiety and noise phobias (such as thunderstorm phobias)

# Treatment

## HEALTH CARE

### General Comments

Realistic expectations for time needed for treatment and understanding behavior modification to successfully resolve the problem; weeks to months, depending on severity and duration, treatment plans may include the following”

### Independence Training

- Teach the dog to be more independent of the person(s)
- All attention is at person's initiation—person begins and ends attention sessions, rather than the dog initiating attention
- No attention on pet demand; ignore jumping, whining, pawing at owner
- Attention, toy and treats must be earned by the pet by performing a task, such as “Sit”
- Decrease following behavior while the person is at home
- Teach the dog to calmly stay in another location, away from the person; create a safe haven for the dog to relax in, on command

### Changing the Pet's Perception of Pre-departure Cues

- Repeat pre-departure cues (such as picking up keys, walking to the door) without leaving
- Repeat two to four times daily, until the dog does not respond to cues with anxious behaviors (such as panting, pacing, following, or increased vigilance)

- Goal is to remove the dog's association with the cues and the person's departures, and to diminish the anxious response—if the dog becomes more anxious, this step is discontinued

### **Counter-Conditioning (Response Substitution)**

- Teach the dog to “Sit/Stay” near the typical exit door
- Gradually increase the distance between the dog and the exit door
- The person slowly progresses toward the door, increasing the time away on each trial
- Eventually elements of departure, such as opening and closing the door, are added
- Finally, the person steps outside the door and returns

### **Classical Counter-Conditioning**

- Leave the dog a delectable food treat or food-stuffed toy on departure
- Associate departure with something pleasant

### **Changing Departure and Return Routine**

- Ignore the pet for 15–30 minutes prior to departure and upon return
- On return, attend to the dog only when it is calm and quiet
- May allow dog outside to eliminate

### **Graduated Planned Departures and Absences**

- Begun after dog does not respond to pre-departure cues
- Use short absences to teach the dog how to be home alone
- Departures must be short enough not to elicit a separation distress response
- Goal—pet learns consistency of person's return and to experience departure and absence without anxiety
- Departures must be just like real departures (person must do all components of departure, including leaving in the car, if that is how he or she usually departs); person will leave a safety cue (such as leaving a radio or television on, ringing a bell) on planned departures only (must not be used on departures where length of absence is not controlled, such as work departures)
- *Initial departure must be very short, 1–5 minutes*
- Length of absence is slowly increased at 3- to 5-minute intervals, if no signs of distress were evident at the shorter interval; increase in interval must be variable; intersperse short (1- to-3 minute) with longer (5- to 20-minute) departures
- If destruction, elimination, or vocalization occurs, departure was too long; use videotape to assess pet's anxiety
- If departures and absences are continued, even though distress behaviors are present, the dog will get worse
- Once the pet can be left for 2–3 hours on a planned departure, it often can be left all day
- Safety cue is slowly phased out over time, or can be used indefinitely

### **Arrangements for the Pet during Retraining and Person's Absence**

- Allow no more destructive activity, if possible
- Mixing up or eliminating triggering departure cues may help diminish the anxious responses
- Doggy daycare arrangements or pet sitters
- Crates must be used cautiously, unless the dog is already crate-trained and calm and comfortable being left in a crate

## **ACTIVITY**

- Regular, scheduled daily exercise and playtime are beneficial

## **DIET**

- No dietary changes are necessary, unless pet also has diarrhea or vomiting

## **Medications**

Medications presented in this section are intended to provide general information about possible treatment. The treatment for a particular condition may evolve as medical advances are made; therefore, the medications should not be considered as all inclusive

- Clomipramine—a tricyclic antidepressant (TCA)—approved by the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for use in the treatment of separation anxiety in dogs; approved for dogs older than 6 months of age; must be given daily, not on an “as needed” basis, as it may take 2–4 weeks before behavioral effect is evident; must be

used with behavioral modification

- Fluoxetine—a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI)—approved by the federal FDA for use in the treatment of separation anxiety in dogs; administer daily in conjunction with a behavioral modification plan; discuss possible side effects with your veterinarian
- Short-term medications below may assist while the other long-acting medications become effective; benzodiazepines, such as alprazolam, for panic at owner departure; may cause sudden excess appetite (known as “polyphagia”)
- Trazodone—to augment calming, discuss possible side effects with the veterinarian
- DAP (Dog Appeasing Pheromone); a synthetic analogue of the natural appeasing pheromones of the nursing bitch that calms puppies; used to calm dogs in fearful, stressful, and anxiety situations (such as separation anxiety and noise phobias); available as a plug-in diffuser, spray and collar

## Follow-Up Care

### PATIENT MONITORING

- Good client follow-up is necessary to monitor both the behavioral treatment plan and medication, if prescribed
- Weekly follow-up is best in the early stages to assess effectiveness of the treatment plan and compliance with instructions—once the dog has become more independent, has become less responsive to pre-departure cues, and is calmer on departures and returns, graduated planned departures may be implemented

### PREVENTIONS AND AVOIDANCE

- Teaching pets how to be left home alone, making pets independent

### POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Injuries during escape attempts
- Ongoing destruction and elimination disrupt the human-animal bond and may result in relinquishment of the pet to an animal shelter or animal control facility
- Other anxieties cause signs that mimic separation distress; if not identified and treated, the problem behavior may worsen

### EXPECTED COURSE AND PROGNOSIS

- Separation anxiety often responds well to behavioral modification, with or without medication
- Some severe cases can be very resistant to treatment; other behavioral disorders occurring at the same time may make resolution more difficult
- Drug therapy alone is rarely curative for most behavioral disorders; realistically, drug therapy can be expected to decrease the anxiety associated with the person's departure, but the dog still must be taught how to be left alone during the person's absences

## Key Points

- Have realistic expectations of the time course of treatment and the need for behavior modification, in order to have successful resolution of the problem
  - Drug therapy alone is rarely curative for most behavioral disorders; drug therapy can be expected to decrease the anxiety associated with the person's departure, but the dog still must be taught how to be left alone during the person's absences
  - Problem behavior may take weeks or months to resolve, depending on severity and duration of the problem
- Blackwell's Five-Minute Veterinary Consult: Canine and Feline, Sixth Edition, Larry P. Tilley and Francis W.K. Smith, Jr. © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.