

Separation anxiety in dogs

Separation anxiety is a common problem. Among these cases, dogs obtained from shelters are overrepresented. Affected dogs are usually very friendly and dependent on the owner, and more highly trained than dogs with other behavior problems. Because of their owner attachment, these dogs become anxious when separated from the owner (i.e., when the owner is either not home with the dog, or not accessible to the dog) and express this anxiety in a variety of ways (e.g., by destroying property, barking, salivating, pacing, urinating or defecating, self-mutilation). Diagnostically it is important to note that these behaviors start within a short time of the owner leaving.

First line treatment may include:

- Two daily walks to reduce anxiety; ignoring the dog for approximately 30 minutes before leaving, and after coming home until the dog settles
- Giving a hollow toy containing food treats some 5 to 10 minutes before leaving; and ignoring attention-getting behavior at any time.
- May want to train the dog to a long down-stay and then use that command to prevent the dog from following them all the time, and when doing planned departures (see below).
- Mixing up the order of predeparture cues makes departure less predictable, and desensitization to these same cues (by presenting them frequently without leaving) will reduce the dog's response to them.
- Drug treatment concomitant with behavior treatment is often indicated. The drug clomipramine (Clomicalm, Novartis) is the only drug licensed in the United States for the treatment of separation anxiety

If necessary, the owner can do planned departures, leaving the dog for initially very short and increasingly longer times, while giving the dog a safety cue (e.g., the sound of the radio). If at all possible, dogs with separation anxiety should not be confined when left alone, because usually this makes the anxiety worse. If the owners keep the dog confined and do not want to risk leaving him loose, they may want to use the planned departure technique with the dog loose in the house during practice departures. In this way they can find out without great risk if it is safe to leave the dog loose (if done this way, being loose becomes a safety cue for the dog).