



FEATURE

DOG SEPARATION ANXIETY *guide*



The creators of Dog Monitor app, together with renowned veterinarians, put together an ultimate guide to separation anxiety. This online helper gives dog owners every piece of information they need to know to effectively prevent or fight separation anxiety. From symptoms to treatment methods, this guide is a complex tool that helps to spot early signs of this disorder and offers possible solutions.

About Dog Monitor Creators

The creators came up with the idea of Dog Monitor app after being approached by some users of a similar app called Baby Monitor 3G. To their surprise, the users told them they were using Baby Monitor 3G to monitor their dogs and that it helps them overcome separation anxiety. The creators then developed a “dog version.”

They started to learn more about the issue of separation anxiety. After discussions with several veterinarians and dog psychologists, they adjusted the app so it helps to solve the separation anxiety more effectively. In cooperation with experts led by MVDr. Zertova they put together all the knowledge about the anxiety and created an online guide. An extract from the site is below:

<http://www.dogmonitorapp.com/separation-anxiety/>

Introduction

Separation anxiety is a state of distress that the dog experiences when the dog owner leaves. In many forms, it affects about 60% of dogs up until 3 years of age, which is an enormous number. Many factors such as long solitude, loneliness, improper training and frightening experiences are to blame.

In today’s busy world we often don’t have as much time for our pets, as they need. Many pet owners come home and find their dogs exhausted, breathing heavily, hungry and thirsty, not having touched their food all day. They usually find their furniture and belongings destroyed.

“It’s important to realise that dogs that suffer from separation anxiety don’t do anything harmful on purpose, as many pet owners think,” says MVDr. Zertova, Czech dog expert.

Dog Separation Anxiety Guide is a website where dog owners can go to find out what separation anxiety in dogs is, what some common symptoms are (and also that they all don’t necessarily signify separation anxiety), what the treatment options and processes are. You can also read stories from vets’ patients on how their problem was treated.

When you notice your dog’s strange behaviour and you’re not sure what may be causing it, before visiting a vet, it’s good to know what signs to look for. Is the dog dependent on one person? What’s the regime of feeding and walking?



How does the dog welcome the owner? That’s when the website comes in handy with a list of symptoms and behaviours to check before visiting a vet. Only vets can properly diagnose and treat separation anxiety.

The Dog Separation Anxiety Guide is a place both for the vets to refer their patients, and for owners to better understand what their dog is going through.

Separation anxiety is a very serious issue that shouldn’t be underestimated and always requires the help of the professional.

What is a separation anxiety?

Separation anxiety is a state of distress and the fear a dog feels, when a person the dog is strongly attached to, leaves the house, or is just about to leave. It is the most common issue dogs and their owners have to face. Any breed (including cross) and different genders, may develop separation anxiety. The disease mostly affects young dogs up until 3 years of age (approximately 60%), whereas in the dog’s middle age, occurrence of separation anxiety drops. It is more common again around the age of 8 years, where it is most possibly connected to other anxiety disorders usual for older age.

Causes of Origin

A dog is a strongly social animal that needs the company of other social partners in order to live a happy life. Solitude can often create fear, anxiety and uncertainty.

Dogs who deal with solitude well are usually the ones with an immune nervous system that are used to being alone gradually. It is less likely for a dog to develop the anxiety if it has enough social contact with other dogs and people outside the family. They also should not be exposed to long periods of separation and should not go through stressful events, such as storms, fireworks or big noises in the house.

It is very difficult to get used to the solitude for puppies older than 16 weeks, that had only lived with their mother or siblings; or for mature dogs that are taken away from their pack. The ones that are likely to develop separation anxiety are also the ones coming from shelters, found on the streets, or from cruel conditions. Even the shortest periods, or just a hint of the possibility that they might be left alone, may cause a panic reaction. Separation anxiety also affects a dog's nervous system, or tendencies for other fears and phobias (these tendencies are usually inherited).

Many factors can cause separation anxiety. The following ones are those that are most commonly connected to developing the anxiety.

- **The owner lives with the dog on her/his own**

This phenomenon is connected to the fact that these dogs may have to spend extended periods of time alone (8 hours or more) when the owner is at work. It also may occur in dogs who live in the company of an elderly person, who only leaves them on rare and brief occasions (eg: when they go to the doctor, or go shopping).

- **No puppy school or good training ground nearby**

Dogs that are used to "work" with the owner, meaning to follow their instructions and to desire reward and recognition, often have problems getting used to solitude.

- **Dog hotels stays**

Separation anxiety may occur during the time the dog stays in an unknown environment of a dog hotel, or some other facility, when the owner cannot take care of it.

- **Dog goes through a frightening experience**

A triggering moment might be a situation when the dog experiences something scary during the time it is home on its own. This includes an intense storm, draft, broken window, robbery or a noisy reconstruction of neighbour's flat.

- **Puppy rearing**

One of the causes that lead to developing separation anxiety, is the puppies being brought up in inadequate conditions, such as a shed, garage, separate room, or a crate, where they lack outside impulses. These dogs are often oversensitive to any sort of stress, including solitude, and it is harder to train them to be in solitude.

How does the fear originate?

Fear is one of the emotions that originate primarily in an almond-shaped mass of nuclei, the amygdala. Amygdala is located in the temporal lobe of the brain and all information about a stimulus and

all possible experience associated with it can be found there. It reacts to a stimulus by sending a signal to three locations: 1) to grey matter that controls the activity of skeletal and muscular system; 2) to the parts of hypothalamus that control the activity of autonomic nervous system; and 3) to the parts of hypothalamus that control the hormonal function. It triggers an instantaneous reaction of the whole body, aimed at saving a life. This reaction is called the fight-or-flight response and it is characterised by increased breathing and heart rate, increased cardiac output, and increased blood flow to vital organs (brains, muscles). Hormonal response involves the release of cortisone, which significantly impacts the glucose metabolism and other important metabolic processes. The body mobilises fast sources of energy.

In some cases these changes are positive, because they allow the animal to fight or run away from the thing that endangers it. When the animal cannot escape or avoid it in any way, chronic stress reaction appears, which might end up harming or even killing the animal.

Character of the response to fear impulse is dependent on several things. There are genetic and empiric factors. In most cases the animal reacts normally to impulses that threatens it in that moment. When the reaction is extensive or nonsensical it is considered to be abnormal. It may lead to dysregulation, loss of control over responses to impulses. This can display in several levels, including neurotransmitters* activities.

*Neurotransmitters are chemical substances that transfer signals and information between nerve cells. The most important neurotransmitters that participate in the response to fear are serotonin, noradrenaline, and gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA). Therefore the treatment of disorders related to fear focuses on influencing those neurotransmitters.

Symptoms of separation anxiety

There are many ways of how separation anxiety displays. It is vital for the owner to realise that the dog that suffers from the separation anxiety never does anything harmful on purpose, and never avenges, even though it is, unfortunately, what most owners think.

- **Destroying house equipment**

The dog is most commonly destroying things connected to the close person: beds, couches, books, bags, shoes, clothes or kitchen items. They often destroy walls and floors around windows and doors, by intense pawing and scratching.

- **Attempts to escape**

The dog is relentlessly trying to escape, so it is scratching and biting the door and window frames. It can also try to dig under the fence or gnaw through a wire fence. The dog chews and bends bars of the crate, jumps or climbs over tall fences and walls, or tries to jump through a closed window. There is a high risk of serious injuries occurring during these desperate acts.

- **Barking and howling**

It mostly begins immediately after the dog is convinced the owner has left. Door closing or a departing car work as signals. With small pauses for listening whether the owner is coming back, the dog is able to bark and howl for many hours. It is not unusual for the dog to do it the entire time the owner is not at home.



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Symptoms of Separation Anxiety (continued)

- **Impulsive excretion**

When the fear kicks in, the metabolism of the dog accelerates and the bladder, as well as rectum, fill in a very short period of time, often in several minutes. Sensitivity of the bladder rises, so the dog feels compulsion to excrete even when the bladder is not full. Fear also causes the sphincter to relax and therefore the dog cannot hold its urine or faeces as well as when it is calm. Therefore it has to empty the bladder and/or bowels immediately, regardless of where it is. The dog does not do this “to spite you,” as many angry dog owners claim, but it is simply an involuntary reaction of the dog’s body, triggered by the fear.

- **Strong salivation**

The fact that the dog drools extensively can also be an organism’s reaction to big fear and anxiety. Sometimes it can drool to such an extent that the dog gets all wet and the floor gets slippery.

- **Accelerated and difficult breathing**

This symptom is connected to the fear reaction of organism. The dog has an open snout, a tongue out, breaths quickly, loudly and sometimes even chokes. Remaining in such state for a long period can lead to complete exhaustion.

- **Inappetence**

When the dog is by itself, it does not eat or drink. As soon as the owner comes back home, it starts to gobble everything which frequently results in vomiting.

- **Stereotypical motion activities**

The dog runs in circles, by the fence, or from one door to another without any specific reason. This sort of behaviour leads to the dog getting tired or completely exhausted.

- **Self-harm**

The dog can harm itself while trying to escape a flat or a crate. It is not irregular to develop a compulsive behaviour when the stressed dog starts to lick its paws, sometimes for many hours. Infected wounds might appear on these spots that go deep to muscles or even bones. These wounds are hard to heal, as the dog licks them over and over again when it faces stress.

- **Following the close person everywhere**

The dog goes through an immense anxiety with the prospect of the owner leaving again, so it fears losing a visual contact, even for a brief moment. It nervously follows the owner all around the flat checking whether he/she is about to go somewhere. The dog cannot relax and calm down, which exhausts the dog.

- **Signs of anxiety when the owner is about to leave**

As soon as the dog spots the first signs of the owner leaving, it starts to shiver, salivate, breathe fast, refuses to go to its place and will not even eat anything. Some dogs are aggressive, while the owner is leaving and does not want to let him/her go from the door or gate.

- **Inactivity and hiding**

A scared dog sometimes tries to hide itself to avoid an activity, such as a morning walk, which is often followed by the owner’s departure. Some dogs try to hide under a parked car or a place hard to access. Some just do not allow their owner to catch them when they let them out before their departure.

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- **Hectic welcoming**

As soon as the owner returns, the dog starts to welcome him/her vigorously. It jumps around, breathes with an open snout and tongue out. It sometimes whines and it takes time to fully calm down. This kind of intense welcoming may occur even after a very short period when the owner was gone.

** Many of these symptoms might not necessarily mean separation anxiety. You can read about differential diagnosis on the website.*

What is important to watch and why?

To watch the dog, know about it’s a typical symptoms and discuss them with veterinarians is absolutely crucial. It is the only way to properly diagnose separation anxiety.

Which persons and animals are members of home?

People the dog does not feel as strongly about, it does not miss as much as the person(s) it finds to be the most important there. It is not always the head of the family as we perceive it.

Does the dog show big dependence on one person?

The affected dog is usually “glued” to the one it has the strongest bond with. The dog lies on the person’s feet or next to him/her on the couch, follows him/her around the house, cannot relax in another room and jumps up anytime it feels the owner might be about to leave.

What is the household’s daily regime?

It is ideal for the dog when there are rituals that keep the dog informed that everything is as it should be. Irregular work shifts, occasional evening absence of the owner, or business trips when the dog is alone for a long time or is watched by unfamiliar people, are risky.



What is the regime of feeding, walking, playing and exercising?

All of this information is important so that the owner can plan the training process accordingly. It is easier to teach the dog solitude when it is used to work with its owner, and be motivated to learn something new. Learning solitude is difficult for the dog that never works with the owner.

What does problematic behaviour look like?

It is vital to consider all the details in time perspective: how much in advance the dog starts to behave nervously, what it looks like, when the anxious behaviour is the strongest, if the symptoms gradually go away, or are equally intense the whole time the owner is gone.

When did this behaviour first occur?

Some dogs that have been brought home as older puppies, or were adopted from shelters may show anxious behaviour from the very first days, during which they form a strong bond with the owner. It is common for the separation anxiety to be preceded by the owner being home for extended time (illness, maternity leave, unemployment) or the owner's absence on the other hand (holiday, long business trip, hospital stay). It can also be developed after separation from a dog or a cat it was used to, while at home.

Under what conditions does this behaviour occur?

Is the dog calm when a familiar person is at home? Does it tolerate at least short "ritual" departures such as going shopping (symbolised by a shopping bag) or going out with a garbage bag?

How does the owner react?

Does he/she scold or beat the dog, because of broken things or wet carpets? Does the owner put the dog in a cage, or tie it up?

How does the dog typically welcome the owner and how does the he/she react?

Is welcoming very hectic, involves jumping, whining and accelerated breathing? Does the dog look guilty, crouches, hides or lies on his back?

What are the habits before the departure and how does the dog react?

The dog starts being nervous when it spots the first signs that usually lead to the owner leaving. Does it react to all the departures the same way, or differently, when it happens in the evening, on weekends etc? Is it different from the behaviour during the week? Does the dog react differently when family members leave one by one and when they leave together? Is the dog calm during some members' departure and anxious when others leave. How long after the owner's departure does the dog start to show symptoms of stress? It is typical for separation anxiety that the dog is anxious before the solitude itself and the biggest stress comes just after or soon after the departure.

Where is the dog while the owner is gone?

Can the dog use the whole flat or house to move around when the owner is not home? Is the dog's space limited? How does the dog react when it is being put in that limited space?



How does the dog behave while left in a different environment and with other people?

Is it possible for the dog to stay calm when left with relatives or friends? Does it eat and drink? Does it rest? Does it play? Does it communicate?

Does the dog get along well with other dogs?

This is vital to know in cases when the dog spends some time in a dog hotel or other similar facilities with other dogs during his therapy.

Does the dog show signs of other fear or phobia?

Unstable dogs that suffer from fear of storms, fireworks or similar stimulus often suffer from separation anxiety as well. Treatment of the separation anxiety in these dogs is time consuming and it is common for them to never fully recover from this anxiety.

How to diagnose separation anxiety?

When the owner brings the dog to the vet, it does not behave in a manner that would allow the doctor to diagnose separation anxiety. The vet is dependent on the information he/she gets from the owner. This information might not have to be perfectly precise and complete.

The best way to diagnose is to have a video recording that shows the dog's behaviour in certain periods of time. Based on the symptoms the dog shows in the recording, the vet is able to determine the diagnosis either immediately or after thorough examinations of all possible systems (urinary, excretory, circular, nerve or skin) by laboratory or imaging methods.

The doctor needs to be familiar with an overall state of health of the patient.

More about MVDr. Hana Zertova

MVDr Hana Zertova graduated from University of Veterinary and Pharmaceutical Sciences in Brno. She worked as an editor in magazines such as Veterinary, Veterinary Clinic and Zodiac and later published her own Pets and health magazine. Mrs Zertova also worked in small animals doctor's office.

She has spent last fifteen years focusing exclusively on behaviour disorders in dogs and cats and has gained her knowledge in this area during her postgraduate studies in Germany. In 2009, she worked on her TV series "Pets' Reformatory" and has written a book entitled "From a puppy to a dog," dealing with the correct way of puppies' upbringing.

Resources:

- **Schmidt W-D:** *Verhaltenstherapie des Hundes. Schlütersche, Hannover, 2002.*
- **Horwitz DF, Neilson JC:** *Canine and Feline Behaviour. Blackwell Publishing, Ames 2007.*
- **Bennet SL:** *Animal Behaviour Case of the Month. JAVMA 234, 12, 2013: 1697-1699.*