

To view this article online: <http://web.aces.uiuc.edu/news/list.cfm?NID=2470>

Separation Anxiety: A Destructive Disease

Ann Marie Falk
Information Specialist
University of Illinois
College of Veterinary Medicine
217/244-1562

Ever wonder what your dog does when you're not at home? Perhaps he is taking a nap on your bed (and drooling on your pillow), chewing on your favorite pair of shoes, or terrorizing the cat. But people whose dogs suffer from separation anxiety are lucky if their house is still standing when they return home!

"Separation anxiety is a form of mental illness affecting dogs. The second their owners leave, they become extremely upset and anxious. Then they become frantic. At this point the dog is not in control of its behavior," explains Dr. Rhonda Schulman, a veterinarian at the University of Illinois Veterinary Teaching Hospital in Urbana.

Separation anxiety is a panic disorder likely caused by overstimulation of the parts of the brain that regulate fear and stress, but the term is often misapplied. Like Attention Deficit Disorder in children, separation anxiety has become a trendy diagnosis. Not every dog that misbehaves when the owners are away has separation anxiety.

Dogs are pack animals and are happiest around their "pack." They are extremely social critters that form strong bonds with their owners. Most dogs do not like it when people leave and will exhibit mild forms of the behaviors associated with separation anxiety. A typical dog left alone may chew shoes out of boredom, but dogs with separation anxiety will chew the refrigerator!

The three main signs of separation anxiety are destruction, vocalization, and elimination. These dogs will bark and howl the entire time the owner is gone. The destruction these dogs do is astounding.

"There are several hallmarks of separation anxiety. The first is the mass destruction that ensues when the dog is left alone. The dogs literally destroy the house, chewing through walls, doors, and even into the refrigerator! Exit points to the house are targets, perhaps because dogs think they can get outside to find their owners. Another distinction is that this extreme destruction occurs within the first 15 minutes after the owner leaves," says Dr. Schulman.

Separation anxiety is not a problem commonly seen in puppies. It is seen in dogs that have been through trauma. Pound dogs have had the worst happen to them: their owners did leave and never came back. Now they are afraid it will happen again. Another example of a scary situation that may trigger separation anxiety is if the dog is present during a burglary. Separation anxiety is generally the result of a traumatic experience.

"Unfortunately separation anxiety is self-perpetuating. These dogs keep getting more and more upset each time the owners leave. Having another pet does not help these dogs, as it is not boredom that is causing the behavior. These dogs are extremely attached to their owners and are very people-oriented. They are often wonderful pets otherwise," states Dr. Schulman.

There is no quick fix for this problem. Anti-depressant and anxiety drugs are not enough to conquer separation anxiety. Medication needs to be used in addition to desensitization therapy. Desensitization therapy involves having the dog sit and stay as the owner gradually steps away. Eventually the owner will

step out of the room as the dog stays and learns that the owner will return. The goal is to take the "scary" factor out of the owner's departure. This is time-consuming work and takes dedication. Many veterinarians may refer owners to a behaviorist.

Crate training these dogs is helpful. It at least provides these dogs a safer place where they can't destroy things or harm themselves. Crate training is highly recommended for dogs that are eating socks out of boredom as well!

For more information about separation anxiety or if you are worried your dog has separation anxiety, contact your local veterinarian.

Source: Dr. Rhonda Schulman

This news release is a service of the University of Illinois College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences. Releases on other topics can be found on the ACES News Web site
<http://web.aces.uiuc.edu/news>