

Fear and Anxiety Disorders in Dogs

Elizabeth A. Shull, DVM, DACVB, DACVIM (Neurology)

BASIC INFORMATION

Description

Separation anxiety and noise phobias are prevalent fear-related disorders of dogs. Dogs with separation anxiety experience distress when left alone or when separated from a favorite person. Dogs with noise phobia experience fear in response to certain noises, especially loud, percussive sounds such as thunder, firecrackers, and gunshots.

Causes

Risk factors for separation anxiety include adoption from a shelter, rescue group, or prior home; prior life as a stray; having a noise phobia; moving to a different location; changes in the people or pets in the home; changes in household schedule; living with a single owner; and living in an urban environment. Problem behaviors associated with separation anxiety are not caused by spite.

Noise phobias are more common in herding breeds and hounds. Dogs with inadequate socialization; dogs that experienced a traumatic event when young; dogs living with another phobic dog; and concurrent separation anxiety are also contributing factors.

Clinical Signs

Separation anxiety has a slightly greater incidence in male and mixed-breed dogs. Many noise phobias develop before 1 year of age, and most are present by 5 years of age.

Signs of separation anxiety include anxiousness as the owner prepares to leave, excessive vocalization, digging, chewing, and rearranging household objects. Some dogs may aggressively growl and bite in an attempt to prevent the person from leaving. Self-injury, especially broken teeth, cuts in the mouth, and broken nails, may occur from attempts to escape. Some dogs also urinate, defecate, salivate, pant, tremble, or do not eat or drink (while the owner is away).

Dogs with noise phobias become more active and restless in response to the noise. They may pace, vocalize, jump against windows or doors, chew, dig, tremble, salivate, pant, eliminate inappropriately, have increased heart rates, and constantly seek to be close to the owner. In some dogs, the fear reaction is dramatic and can lead to activities that are destructive to the home or themselves.

Diagnostic Tests

Diagnosis is based on the presence of clinical signs and exclusion of other behavioral causes. A medical history, physical examination, and laboratory tests are done to exclude possible contributing conditions, such as urinary tract, gastrointestinal, hormonal, metabolic, or seizure disorders.

Separation anxiety can be challenging to diagnose, because many possible causes exist for the behaviors that occur with separation anxiety. Most noise phobias are easy to diagnose; however, if only the dog hears the sound or if the sound is not recognized by the owner, it may appear as if the dog is having a spontaneous

panic attack. With thunderstorm phobia, it is common for the dog to act fearful before people are aware a storm is approaching.

It may be difficult to differentiate these two conditions if the dog is afraid of noises only when it is alone.

TREATMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

Treatment Options

Treatment for separation anxiety includes the following:

- Increase exercise and play, such as agility training.
- Encourage independence; discourage constant close contact.
- Ignore pestering and demanding behaviors; reinforce calm behaviors.
- Make arrivals and departures low-key; ignore the dog for 30 minutes before departure.
- Stop punishment, because it increases the dog's anxiety level.
- Consider alternative measures, such as pet-sitters, doggy day care, or taking the dog along.
- Consider behavioral modification training, as outlined by your veterinarian.
- Antianxiety medications are often beneficial. Two drugs, clomipramine (*Clomicalm*) and fluoxetine (*Reconcile*) are approved for treating separation anxiety.
- Nonpharmaceutical antianxiety products, such as *Anxiety Wrap* (a stretchy body suit) and *DAP* (a synthetic calming pheromone), may be tried.

Treatment for noise phobia includes the following:

- Ignore the fear behavior.
- Avoid both punishment and reassurance.
- Establish a safe, dark place where sounds are muffled; provide pleasant, calm experiences there.
- Play music with similar tones to mask the phobic sound.
- Consider behavioral modification techniques, such as desensitization and counter-conditioning.
- Antianxiety medications may be beneficial, but no drugs are approved specifically for this condition.
- Nonpharmaceutical antianxiety products (*DAP*, *Anxiety Wrap*, *Storm Defender*, *Thunderband*, and *Mutt Muffs*) may be tried.

Follow-up Care

Maintain a record of the occurrence and its severity to assess response to treatment. Laboratory tests are periodically done in dogs on long-term behavioral medications to monitor for possible side effects.

Prognosis

Many cases significantly improve with treatment; however, several weeks to months are often needed to achieve a satisfactory response. Systematic trials of treatments are commonly needed to determine which strategies and medications are most beneficial for an individual dog.