

# Possessive and Territorial Aggression in Dogs

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## BASIC INFORMATION

### Description

Possessive aggression occurs when the dog is defending a cherished object (toy, bone, food). Control of important resources is somewhat normal in dogs, but possessive aggression exceeds the tolerated limits of this behavior.

Territorial aggression is defensive behavior of a geographic area. Although it is normal for dogs to bark at strangers and other animals approaching their home turf, territorial aggression usually involves an unacceptable escalation of protective behaviors. Territorial aggression can involve small spaces (a favored resting place, a room, an automobile) or large ones (yards, farms).

### Causes

Dogs that have lived as strays or were allowed to roam free may develop possessive aggression as a means of survival. Lack of appropriate training and behavioral modification of puppies that manifest defense of desired objects can reinforce their possessive behavior, and the behavior can worsen over time.

A combination of genetics and learning probably contributes to territorial aggression. Fear aggression can accompany territorial aggression, and both conditions may worsen at maturity.

### Clinical Signs

Possessive aggression occurs only when the dog is defending an object. Signs of possessive and territorial aggression can be a component of dominance aggression, but other signs should also be noted (such as dominance toward the owner and other dogs) with the latter condition.

Signs of territorial aggression include persistent, loud barking; growling; snapping; and biting. These signs occur despite lack of threat by the approaching person or animal. Usually, the aggression is directed toward non-family members, but occasionally the behaviors are directed toward members of the household (human and animal) when certain areas of the house are entered.

Territorial aggressiveness usually increases in intensity as the distance of the approaching individual decreases and does not abate despite attempts at intervention or correction, or signs of submission on the part of the approaching animal. Confinement of the dog to a small space (crate, dog house, chains, or runs) may intensify the signs. Intact male dogs commonly patrol their territories, but the behavior can also occur in neutered males and female dogs.

### Diagnostic Tests

Diagnosis is often made based on the history and clinical signs. A detailed behavioral history and observation of the behavior may

be needed to confirm the diagnosis. Routine laboratory tests may be recommended to rule out any contributing medical conditions (such as conditions that cause pain or increased appetite).

## TREATMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

### Treatment Options

Treatment of possessive aggression involves the following:

- If the coveted item can be identified and is nonessential, it can be removed from the environment.
- If the item cannot be removed, then behavioral modification techniques, such as desensitization and counter-conditioning, may be used. These techniques are designed to alter the dog's response to people and other animals that approach the coveted item.

Treatment of territorial aggression may involve the following:

- If possible, do not leave the dog outside unsupervised.
- Start obedience training, using positive reinforcement, and issue appropriate commands when the aggression begins.
- Keep the dog muzzled, on a leash, or confined to an area where it cannot see approaching visitors. Head collars (such as the *Gentle Leader*) may also be helpful when the animal is leashed.
- Neutering of sexually intact animals sometimes helps to decrease the signs, but surgery rarely solves the problem.
- Desensitization and counter-conditioning behavioral techniques may be tried to modify the dog's response to strangers approaching and entering its territory.

When instituting behavioral modification techniques for these two conditions, your veterinarian may establish a program for you or refer your dog to a veterinary behavioral specialist.

### Follow-up Care

Behavioral modification techniques can be confusing at first, so check in frequently with your veterinarian if you are unsure how to proceed. After several days, the techniques usually become easier.

### Prognosis

Prognosis for these behaviors is variable. Many cases of possessive aggression significantly improve with treatment; however, several weeks to months are often needed to achieve a satisfactory response. Territorial aggression can be more difficult to control and requires sustained, long-term diligence. Systematic trials of treatments are commonly needed to determine which strategies are most beneficial for an individual dog.