## **Home Alone**

Separation anxiety affects nearly one out of 15 dogs, but you can alleviate the stress your pal feels when you're away. Here's how.

When you get ready to leave your house, does your dog whine or act depressed? When you come home, are there holes in the carpet or wet stains on the rug? If you answered yes to any of these questions, your dog could be suffering from separation anxiety.

Dogs are social beings and they love spending time with the people in their "packs." Some dogs, however, become nervous or panicky when left alone. They may drool, pant, bark excessively, soil in the house or engage in destructive behavior. They may also try to escape from their homes. These are all signs of separation anxiety.

Who gets it? Some dogs may develop separation anxiety more readily than others. "Dogs that exhibit separation anxiety often have a history that includes a 'separation event,' " says Kimberly Barry, Ph.D., a certified animal behaviorist from Austin, Texas. An example might be a dog that's adopted into a new home after being abandoned. However, not all home-alone dogs that go on barking sessions, soil carpets or trash their homes suffer from separation anxiety.

Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D., a certified animal behaviorist from Littleton, Colorado, says the key to determining whether your dog suffers from separation anxiety is to see when the behavior occurs. "Separation anxiety behaviors occur within the first 30 minutes after the owner leaves," she says. "They also occur consistently when the dog is left alone," not just every now and then.

## What You Can Do

If your dog shows mild signs of separation anxiety nervousness when you depart, whimpering and crying at the door, and barking during the day, here's how you can ease his distress:

- Be understanding. "The dog is doing this because he's anxious," says Barry. "He's not misbehaving or being spiteful." For that reason, don't punish or isolate him. Either action only worsens the problem.
- Help him forget to be lonesome. An owner can help a mildly anxious dog by redirecting his behavior. Fill a toy with kibbles or biscuits and present the toy to the dog before departing. He may become so engrossed in ferreting out the stuffed goodies that he'll forget to be upset.
- Feed him. A dog with a full tummy is likely to be more relaxed than his hungry counterpart. At minimum, it's a good idea to feed an anxious dog two smaller meals instead of one large meal each day.
- Downplay your comings and goings. Many experts suggest not making a big deal of leaving the house or of coming home. That means no long, emotional goodbyes when leaving or wildly enthusiastic hellos when arriving home.
- Gradually get him used to solitude. Experts suggest developing a plan to help your dog learn to tolerate being alone. Offer him a treat-stuffed toy, then leave the house for a minute or two. As your dog adjusts to being alone, gradually prolong the amount of time you're gone.
- Get him some company. A pet-sitter or doggie day-care is a big help. Check the Yellow Pages listings under "Kennels" or "Pet-Sitting Services" or ask your veterinarian about these options.

## Help for Severe Cases

Dogs with severe separation anxiety need the help of a veterinarian or animal behaviorist. These professionals can prescribe medications that will help calm the animal. However, "medication is not meant to be a cure" for separation anxiety, notes Barry. Owners need to work with veterinarians and behaviorists to develop a program to change an anxious dog's behavior. Such treatment plans take time, but are well worth the effort, for both dog and owner.