

PET ANXIETY ISSUES

Fears, Phobias, and Anxieties in Pets

Does your cat run and hide every 4th of July? Does your dog urinate when the trash man drives past your house? Your pet may be suffering from anxiety that derives from a fear or phobia.

Fear is the instinctual feeling of apprehension resulting from a situation, person, or object presenting an external threat – whether real or perceived. The response of the nervous system prepares the body for the freeze, fight, or flight syndrome.



Moreover, the persistent and excessive fear of a specific stimulus is referred to as a phobia. It has been suggested that once a phobic event has been experienced, any event associated with it, or the memory of it, is sufficient enough to generate a response. The most common phobias are associated with noises (such as thunderstorms or fireworks).

Anxiety, meanwhile, is the anticipation of future dangers from unknown or imagined origins that result in normal body reactions associated with fear; most common visible behaviors are elimination (i.e., urination and/or passage of bowel movements), destruction, and excessive vocalization (i.e., barking, crying). Separation anxiety is the most common in animals. When alone, the animal exhibits anxiety or excessive distress behaviors.

Most fears, phobias, and anxieties develop around 12 to 36 months of age, whereas a profound form of fear and withdrawal from an unknown cause occurs at 8 to 10 months of age. Old-age-onset separation anxiety may be a cause of a decline in thinking, learning, and memory in elderly pets.



Symptoms and Types of Anxiety in Pets

Mild fears: signs may include trembling, tail tucked, withdrawal, hiding, reduced activity, and passive escape behaviors

- Panic: signs may include active escape behavior, and increased, out-of-context, potentially injurious motor activity
- Classic signs of sympathetic autonomic nervous system activity, including diarrhea
- Anxieties: lesions secondary to anxious behavior (such as licking and biting at the self)

Causes of Fear and Anxiety in Pets

Any illness or painful physical condition increases anxiety and contributes to the development of fears, phobias, and anxieties

- Aging changes associated with nervous system changes; infectious disease (primarily viral infections in the central nervous system), and toxic conditions, such as lead poisoning, may lead to behavioral problems, including fears, phobias, and anxieties
- Fear from a terrible experience; pets may have been forced into an unfamiliar and frightening experience
- Cats & Dogs that are deprived of social and environmental exposure until 14 weeks of age may become habitually fearful
- Phobias and panic may have a history of inability to escape or get away from the stimulus causing the phobia and panic, such as being locked in crate
- Separation anxiety: history of abandonment, multiple owners, rehoming, or prior neglect is common; exacerbating the condition may be that the pet has been often abandoned or rehomed because of separation anxiety.



Diagnosis of Fear and Anxiety in Pets

Your veterinarian will first want to rule out other conditions that might be causing the behavior, such as brain or thyroid disease. The behavior could also be originating from a response to a toxic substance, such as lead. Blood tests will rule out or confirm such a possibility.

If your veterinarian diagnoses a simple fear, anxiety, or phobia, a prescribed medication may be all that is needed. But your doctor will most likely make recommendations based on your individual Cat or Dog, the fear trigger, and types of behavioral techniques that can be used to alleviate your pet's fears and anxieties.

How to Calm an Anxious Pet

There are medications that can be given to pets to help with their anxiety, but drugs are not for every pet and are typically implemented only as a last resort in severe instances. Talk to your vet to see what the best option would be for your pet.

If your pet has extreme panic and separation anxiety and needs to be protected until medications can become effective, which can take from days to weeks, hospitalization may be the best choice. Otherwise, you will care for your pet at home, and will need to provide protection from self-inflicted physical injury until the pet calms down. You may need to arrange for day care or pet-sitting.

Affected pets will respond to some degree to a combination of behavior modification and treatment with anti-anxiety medication. If there is a condition that causes itchiness and/or pain that is exacerbating the anxiety, it must be controlled. Your pet may need to live in a protected environment with as few social stressors as possible. These animals do not do well in competitive shows.

Behavior modification will be up to you. You will need to teach your pet to relax in a variety of environmental settings. Avoid reassuring the pet when it is in the midst of experiencing fear or panic; the pet may interpret this as a reward for its behavior. Encourage calmness, but do not reinforce the fear reaction.

For Dogs

Remember that not all dogs are calmer when crated; some dogs panic when caged and will injure themselves if forced to be confined. Absolutely avoid punishment for behavior related to fear, phobia, or anxiety.

Desensitization and counter-conditioning are most effective if the fear, phobia, or anxiety is treated early. The goal is to decrease the reaction to a specific stimulus (such as being left alone in the dark). Desensitization is the repeated, controlled exposure to the stimulus that usually causes a fearful or anxious response in such a way that the dog does not respond with the undesirable response. With repeated efforts, the goal is to decrease the dog's undesirable response. Counter-conditioning is training the dog to perform a positive behavior in place of the negative behavior (in this case, fear or anxiety).

For example, teach your dog to sit and stay, and when your dog performs appropriately you can reward it appropriately. Then, when your dog is in a situation where it might show the undesirable response, have it sit and stay.



The signs involved in an oncoming anxiety attack are subtle; learn to recognize the physical signs associated with the fears, phobias, and anxieties and head the behavior off before it has a chance to take over your dog's behavior.

For Cats



Counter-conditioning involves training the cat to perform a positive behavior in place of the negative behavior (in this case, fear or anxiety). For example, teach your cat to sit and stay in the same place, and when your cat responds appropriately you can reward it appropriately with a small treat and a comforting pat. Then, when your cat is in a situation where it has previously shown the undesirable response, have it sit and stay. The signs involved in an oncoming anxiety attack are subtle; learn to recognize the physical signs associated with the fears, phobias, and anxieties and head the behavior off before it has a chance to take over your cat's behavior.

Living and Management for Fear and Anxiety in Pets

As long as your pet is on medications, your veterinarian will want to follow-up by conducting occasional blood testing to make sure your pet's blood chemicals stay in balance. If behavior modification does not work over the long term, your veterinarian may want to modify the approach. If left untreated, these disorders are likely to progress.

Most treatment will be long-term, possibly years, with the treatment duration depending on the number and intensity of symptoms and how long the condition has been going on. Minimum treatment averages four to six months.

Prevention of Fear and Anxiety in Pets

Expose your pets to a variety of social situations and environments when they are still young (up to the time they are 14 weeks of age) to decrease the likelihood of fearful behavior; kittens and puppies that are deprived of social and environmental exposure until 14 weeks of age may become habitually fearful, which can be avoided with only a little exposure during this formative time.

For more detailed information on Pet Anxiety please visit these links:
http://www.petmd.com/dog/conditions/behavioral/c_dg_fears_phobia_anxiety
http://www.petmd.com/cat/conditions/behavioral/c_ct_fear_phobia_anxiety

Please make an
appointment to discuss
your pet's health:



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