

Older Dog Behaving Oddly

Bad dog behavior could be a sign of separation anxiety.

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Q. My 12-year-old pit bull has suddenly begun to exhibit some unusual behavior: digging under the bed, tearing up paper behind a chair, loss of appetite, constant whimpering and a more-than-usual desire to make body contact with me. A co-worker said that this is most likely separation anxiety. Do you agree and what can be done to calm my dog down?

A. The unusual behavior you describe for your dog could be separation anxiety if it occurs when you are gone. It's not uncommon for older dogs to develop separation anxiety, even if they have never shown it before. Destructive behavior, barking incessantly and having accidents in the house can all be signs of separation anxiety. You should never crate a dog that shows anxiety when you leave, because it creates even higher levels of distress.

You may want to secretly observe your dog's behavior after you leave by sneaking back into the house to see what is going on. If your dog is becoming truly destructive, you should seek veterinary care immediately to prevent any injury, and ongoing expensive damage.

However, if some of these behaviors occur when you are around, I would be concerned about Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome (CDS), a canine form of Alzheimer's disease. Researchers have noticed the same pathological changes in the brain tissue of dogs with CDS as in human Alzheimer patients. With CDS, you might notice disorientation, strange changes in behavior and accidents in the house. Like Alzheimer's patients, a dog with CDS may seem normal at times, then occasionally "check out."

Because it's so difficult to diagnose anything over the internet, I encourage you to visit a veterinarian with a special interest in behavioral problems. The first step will be to perform a good physical exam and complete blood panel. If those are normal, your vet will go into a detailed history to try to arrive at a diagnosis for this behavioral problem. In the case of separation anxiety and CDS, there are some medications and environmental changes you can consider to help alleviate the problem.

In the meantime, try to observe the differences in your dog's behavior, and when they seem to occur. Is there any difference after eating? At night? What happens when you leave? All of this information will provide clues to the diagnosis.

Best, Jon Geller, DVM

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