

Separation Anxiety in Dogs

Work with your veterinarian to manage your dog's separation anxiety.

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Q. We have a 3-year-old male German Shepherd Dog who is very high-strung. He urinates outside his crate every day while we're at work. We have tried various crates, different rooms, Clomicalm (for nine months) and other calming products, but nothing has worked. He chews and destroys things if we leave him free to roam the house (he has eaten a CD player, hiking boots, watches, hats, etc.). We are really afraid he could hurt himself or get sick. He was raised initially to be a Seeing Eye Dog, but was rejected for lack of confidence. He listens and obeys commands extremely well and is a great dog otherwise, but this urinating habit is annoying! Would changing his food help at all? What advice can you suggest?

A. You have a challenging problem. Just as with any medical condition, a correct diagnosis is necessary before an effective treatment plan can be formulated. It sounds like he has separation anxiety, and if so, there are some strategies that can be effective.

First, you and your veterinarian must rule out any kind of medical condition of the urinary tract (infection, bladder stones, etc.) to determine if the inappropriate urination is due to a medical problem or is behavior-based. Performing a good physical exam, a urinalysis and possibly some X-rays is the best way to approach this.

Once you determine his urinary tract is healthy, you must determine if his housetraining was fully completed. It's very unusual for a dog to urinate in the house. Can he hold his urine all night? You should look in greater detail at his behavior when you're gone. Does he vocalize, bark or whine? You may need a video camera setup to record his behavior while you're away. If his destructive behavior appears to be linked to you leaving the house and is accompanied by vocalization, destructive behavior, and inappropriate urination or defecation, then a diagnosis of separation anxiety is most probable.

Talk with your veterinarian or a dog behaviorist about behavior-modification strategies for separation anxiety. They are quite time-consuming and require perseverance and patience, but ultimately are often successful. Your dog may, in fact, be a candidate for doggie daycare where he is supervised all day. That actually might be less expensive than the drugs, surgeries, replacement boots, watches, etc., and the time you spend trying to desensitize him to your departure. Dogs with separation anxiety should not be crated when left because their anxiety can be heightened, leading to frenetic, desperate behavior that can result in self-injury.

Most dogs that are service school dropouts make excellent pets. I hope you get things figured out with your Shepherd. He sounds like an intelligent dog, but he may be carrying a little bit of emotional baggage.

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