

Make Work for Your Dog's Idle Paws

Lots of toys can keep your dog occupied and entertained while you're away.

Face it most of us humans have to work for a living, and like it or not, our beloved pets usually have to hold down the fort while we're gone. But do they mind? That depends on the dog.

"Dogs are pack animals," said Paula Kuhfus, DVM, of Radcliffe Animal Care Clinic in Radcliffe, Iowa. "They like to have other dogs or the humans in their pack around, so if they are left alone, you'll often see destructive behavior."

When destructive behavior gets out of control, it may be because your dog suffers from separation anxiety. "Separation anxiety is a very common problem we see here," said Daniel Estep, Ph.D., of Animal Behavior Associates in Littleton, Colo. If your dog exhibits the signs of separation anxiety including obsessive barking, destruction and symptoms akin to depression seek help from your veterinarian and/or an animal behaviorist.

For the normal, well-adjusted, well-socialized dog, the long day just might get plain boring. "Bored dogs can be destructive," Dr. Estep said. "They might try to escape. If your dog isn't allowed on the furniture, you may find that it goes there anyway when you're away.

"If you have a doggy door, your dog may drag things out into the yard that don't belong there or bring things from the yard into the house," Dr. Estep said. "He may get overly excited when he sees another dog or person out the window. A dog might even develop fears and phobias, especially noise phobias, and these should be treated by a vet or a behaviorist."

What's the best way to keep a bored dog amused?

Toyland. Provide your dog with lots of toys or other safe objects to keep it occupied. A variety of toys rotated weekly or monthly will help to keep your dog interested. Among your choices: Plastic cubes containing different compartments that hold kibble. The dog has to figure out how to manipulate the cube so the food spills out. Stuffed animal toys. Dogs love to "adopt" stuffed animals and may carry them everywhere. But don't buy any toys with small, hard parts, such as plastic eyes or buttons, or strings or ribbons your dog could chew off and swallow. Balls with weights in them that roll around by themselves when you turn on a switch. Mint-flavored tennis balls. Rope toys, easy to pick up and satisfying to gnaw. Some new versions have pig ears or rubber balls attached.