



**Humane
World for
Animals™**

Formerly called the Humane
Society of the United States

Separation anxiety

What is separation anxiety?

Separation anxiety is a disorder that can result in a spectrum of behaviors such as:

- Trembling
- Salivating
- Excessive vocalization
- Overgrooming
- Loss of bladder control
- Minor to major destruction of your home

It can be triggered during times of transition, such as moving from a busy foster home or shelter to a single-pet household, family members returning to work or school after a long period of time at home, or the death of a family member or other pet.

"In really simple terms, separation anxiety is just the fear of being left alone and the unknown that follows," says veterinarian Dr. Nellie Goetz. "Animals live in the here and now ... so when you leave, as far as they know, you could be gone forever."

How to prevent or treat separation anxiety

Tire out your pet physically and mentally. To reduce both boredom and anxiety, take dogs on long walks, trying out new routes and allowing lots of sniffing, and then bring out puzzle toys or long-lasting treats (such as a filled, frozen Kong toy or a Frisbee smeared with peanut butter) before you leave. Cats will enjoy playtime before work and plenty of perches and cat trees. If it's in the budget, doggy daycare or a dog walker, pet sitter or neighbor checking in midday can also help.

Establish a routine. Try your best to leave at the same time and come home at the same time, keeping your departures and returns as relaxed as possible to avoid reinforcing your pets' anxiety with your own.

Play music or other soothing noise when you're gone. For animals used to noise, music (one study showed dogs prefer reggae, and cats prefer classical) can help some pets' anxiety but exacerbate others', so if it's not working after a week, try something else.

Try a smaller space that isn't a crate. Crates can worsen separation anxiety in some dogs. If you need to confine your pet, pick the room where your pet is most comfortable and use a playpen, baby gate or closed door to block off the area. Confine your pet gradually to gauge their stress level, starting with just five minutes at a time.

Reach out for help. Talk to your veterinarian about prescribing anti-anxiety medication to help reduce your pets' anxiety baseline while you continue to try soothing techniques, or consider a certified professional dog trainer to help you neutralize anxiety triggers using positive-reinforcement training techniques. Ask your local shelter or rescue if they can recommend or provide additional resources.

Be patient. Never punish your pet for separation anxiety behaviors; punishment isn't effective and can instead increase anxiety. Patience, compassion and consistency are key.

Get tips for transitioning dogs to a new home at humaneworld.org/newdog.