

# Anxiety in Dogs

A Brief Guide • Part of the Educational Pet Disease Series from Lap of Love

## Signs & Symptoms

### Initial Symptoms

- Panting
- Pacing
- Ears Back
- Hiding
- Shaking/tremoring
- Yawning

### Intermediate Symptoms

- Drooling
- Licking
- Tail is tucked under
- Lack of appetite
- Looking away frequently
- Vomiting

### Advanced Symptoms

- Red eyes
- Lip licking
- Inappropriate urination
- Inappropriate defecation
- Clingy behavior
- Severe avoidance

## What Is Generalized Canine Anxiety?

Anxiety, contained within the diagnosis of canine behavior disorders, is one of the most common reasons for a pet to be brought to a shelter, re-homed, or abandoned. Unfortunately, the general public often lacks behavioral education regarding dog ownership and therefore, despite the severity of a variety of behavioral disorders, many owners feel at a loss to control and help their pet and their family. Generally, most dogs exhibit some degree of anxious and fearful behaviors; some of the most common include separation anxiety, storm and noise phobia, food aggression, fearful aggression and, less commonly, offensive aggression (directed at humans and/or animals). Similar to people, stress, regardless of the source, affects the pet's whole wellbeing - stress takes a toll on the physical health as well as the emotional stability of an animal. Stress can manifest physically as recurrent infections, stomach disorders, acid reflux, obesity, and stress licking. Emotional stress may appear as changes in bathroom habits, appetite loss, or increased isolation such as avoidance or hiding.

## Diagnosis

As stress can manifest from both emotional and physical stimuli, anxiety secondary to another condition is very common. Primary anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues that stem from a primary neurological brain disorder also exist and may respond well to medical management. Diagnosing the disease is generally accomplished with a detailed owner history and the ability of the clinician to observe the pet for classic signs of anxiety such as nervous yawns, looking away, tucking their tail, growling, and other behaviors.

## Treatment and Management

Regardless of the initial cause(s) of the anxiety, treatment centers around a multimodal approach that incorporates medical care, supplemental, and behavioral therapy. Consultation with a veterinary behaviorist can prove very beneficial to formulate a plan that not only addresses potential medication that may be helpful, but also to discuss basic, at home behavioral modification plans. Some of the central concepts taught to correct behavior at home include:

**Desensitization**, used to treat the actual cause of the anxiety in a pet, is attempted through short, controlled, non-threatening exposures to the source of the pet's anxiety. For example, desensitization to nail trimmers may begin with the nail trimmers in view of the pet. This creates a small non-threatening situation for the pet to dial down their own anxiety. The level of anxiety-eliciting challenges slowly increase until the dog will let someone clip the nails.

**Counter Conditioning** is a method wherein the pet receives a consistent reward every time they are exposed to their anxiety-inducing stimulus until they learn to associate a reward with the feared stimulus. For example, if every time an owner gives their dog a treat and touches the pet's paws, eventually the treat will outweigh the anxiety.

Avoid the stimulus when possible. For example, some owners prepare for a thunderstorm by shutting the blinds, sheltering the pet in a calm area, and trying to avoid the anxiety itself as much as possible.



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Continued

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## Management Tips

### Consider providing:

- Thunder shirts and therapeutic clothes
- Pheromone collars and other products
- Natural calming supplements like Composure
- A diet such as Royal Canin Calm
- A more consistent routine
- Safe places to hide
- Calming products in anticipation of events that are stressful
- Calming, pet-safe, essential oils
- Calming music when left alone
- Structured time with your pet alone

### Try to:

- Be consistent with medications
- Treat any medical conditions present and manage chronic diseases
- Never force a stressful situation
- Always reward positive behavior
- Socialize your pet with as many people and situations as safely possible
- Avoid triggers that are well known
- Track appetite, urination, drinking, weight, vomiting, diarrhea, energy, etc.
- Give everyone in the family a role
- Try and establish crate training
- Try to use family, friends, or in home pet sitters and groomers

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## Medical and Supplemental Therapy

Many pets with generalized anxiety can greatly benefit from one or more medical options to reduce and manage anxiety before it progresses to depression and aggression. A multimodal approach with other therapies, such as behavioral modification, is ideal. Medications such as Prozac can take weeks to begin working and need dose management over time. Other medications for short term anxiety, such as Xanax or Acepromazine, can be used as needed with or without the long-term medications. Several supplements such as herbal or pheromone containing can help some pets; owners should proceed with a trial and error approach to determine what works best for their pet. Anxiety reducing clothing and even some diets with calming ingredients are also available. Acupuncture, massage, socialization, increased stimulation, and exercise are other therapies to explore.

## Prognosis

The prognosis for generalized anxiety is unpredictable, based on many facets of the dog and the owner. Anxiety is considered a chronic, incurable but manageable disease. Proper medication with behavioral modification and supplements generally results in a favorable prognosis for most pets. Remember that anxiety is NOT the same as offensive aggression where a pet has displayed consistent progressive and escalated aggressive behavior despite efforts to address the problem. In those situations, humane euthanasia may be the best option. Consult with your veterinarian and a veterinary behaviorist, and tailor the treatment plan to your specific pet's needs.

### Never:

- Try and challenge a dog showing clear aggression and signs of warning behavior
- Physically harm your pet in response to a negative behavior

### Always:

- Make sure your pet is on a leash, up to date on their rabies vaccination, registered, identifiable, microchipped and controllable
- Warn others of your pet's behavior before allowing them to touch/approach your pet.