

ANXIETY

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is a feeling of unease, apprehension, worry, or nervousness.

Anxiety can be short-lived and related to certain events or triggers, such as thunderstorms, fireworks, car rides, the vet, new people, etc.

Anxiety can also be chronic, ongoing, and seemingly have no triggering event. This is typically considered an anxiety disorder.

WHAT CAUSES ANXIETY?

Just as with humans, anxiety in dogs is caused by a variety of factors, including:

- Genetics - if either parent is anxious, the puppies are more likely to be.
- Learned behavior - puppies will watch their mother to learn how they should feel about a new situation. If the mother is anxious, the puppies will learn this anxious behavior. Anxious behavior can also be learned from owner behavior as well.
- Lack of proper socialization. The socialization period for puppies ends at 12-16 weeks, and before then they should have lots of positive exposure to new people, animals, smells, sights, sounds, etc. The more early socialization, the more confident they're likely to be. Puppies with limited socialization are far more likely to have anxiety issues, such as those born in shelters or puppy mills or kept in the house until fully vaccinated.
- Traumatic experience(s).
- Poor physical health.
- Not having their needs met - love, attention, exercise, quality food, water, and mental stimulation.

SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY

Each dog shows anxiety differently. Common signs of anxiety are:

- shaking/trembling
- drooling
- tucked tail
- heavy panting (unrelated to temperature or activity)
- pacing/aimlessly wandering
- barking at nothing/excessive barking or whining
- aggression/ crankiness
- restless/unable to settle down and relax
- hypervigilant
- excessive self-licking or biting, often to the point of raw spots or bald patches
- tail chasing/spinning
- snapping at things that aren't there
- watching things that aren't there
- refusal to eat or take treats
- lack of interest in activities they normally love
- less responsive/obedient than normal
- avoidant behavior - trying to leave, not wanting to be petted or touched



HOW TO HELP YOUR DOG'S ANXIETY

Exercise: Just as with people, exercise is a powerful tool to combat anxiety, and one that is highly underutilized. According to studies in people, exercise can be as effective as medication due to feel-good endorphins, chemicals produced in the brain to combat pain, stress, and anxiety.

Studies show that a vigorous workout can reduce anxiety for hours after the exercise has ended. Regular, routine exercise can have longer lasting effects.

Play fetch, go for a run, leash up your dog for a bike ride, or go for a hike or long walk. In the winter you can go snow shoeing or cross-country skiing or just bundle up and go for a walk. You can also do an indoor walk at a pet-friendly store.

Training: This can help in several ways. First, if your dog has a specific trigger, you can work to create positive associations with the trigger through a technique called counterconditioning and desensitization. Second, it helps your dog build confidence and makes it easier for you to communicate with them. If your dog is anxious, you can distract them with cues they know, such as shake, roll over, sit, down, speak, etc. Help keep their minds off the stressful thing by focusing on a specific and simple task.

Supplements: There are several great non-prescription options to ease your dog's anxiety.

- Solliquin. This is a flavored tablet you'll give once daily for generalized anxiety or before a triggering event for dogs with situational anxiety. It contains magnolia extract, philodendron extract, L-theanine, and whey protein. This is not prescription but must be purchased from a vet or online vet pharmacy. I recommend vetrx.com or chewy.com.
- CBD. This is becoming increasingly popular among dogs and their humans. CBD for pets comes in both treat form and in an oil you can give directly to your dog from the dropper or sprinkle on top of their kibble. This is usually given twice daily for generalized anxiety or an hour before a triggering event for dogs with specific anxiety. Not all CBD products are created equal, so be sure to do your homework and find a reputable company. Two brands I recommend are Charlotte's Web (online, military discount) and Pet Releaf (online or Prairie Dog Pet Mercantile).
- Adaptil. Adaptil is the synthetic version of a dog-appeasing pheromone, naturally produced by mother dogs to calm their pups. Adaptil comes in several forms: a collar, a plugin wall diffuser, and a spray. The collar is what I recommend, as it has the highest concentration of the pheromone and will travel with your dog. The collar will need replaced about every 4 weeks.

Prescription Medication: People are often very wary of the idea of medicating their dog for anxiety. There is a common misconception that medication will turn a dog into a drooling, sedated zombie. The truth is, many medications have few to no side effects, and most side effects are temporary. **Medication will make your dog a better version of themselves.**

It's important to remember that anxiety is the result of a chemical imbalance in the brain. It's a very real, very physical problem. It's a miserable feeling, especially when it's chronic, and your dog deserves to feel better. You would give your dog medication for physical pain, why not medication for emotional pain?



Finding the right medication can be tricky. If the first one doesn't work, or has side effects you can't handle, talk to your vet about switching and trying a different one. Sometimes it takes a few attempts before finding one that works with your dog's brain chemistry. The dosing may also need adjusting. Your vet will start at the lowest dose. If it's not helping after a few weeks, you can discuss a dose increase with your vet.

Finding the right vet can also be tricky. Not every veterinarian is knowledgeable about behavioral health in dogs, just like not every primary care doctor is knowledgeable about mental illness in people. Sometimes you'll need a specialist, a veterinary behaviorist, the animal equivalent of a psychiatrist.

"I wish I had started this sooner." This is what most people say after putting their dog on medication and seeing improvement. It can be life changing for both you and your dog.

Common medications include:

Prozac - an SSRI antidepressant. The most common side effect is decreased appetite, and this is usually temporary. The generic is called fluoxetine and can be obtained at Walmart for \$4 a month. This is a long-acting medication and will take about 2-3 weeks before you notice improvement and 6 weeks to reach full therapeutic levels.

Zoloft or sertraline - an SSRI antidepressant. This is also a long-acting medication and has similar side effects to Prozac.

Clomipramine or Clomicalm - a tricyclic antidepressant. This is the most expensive of the common medications. Common side effects include decreased appetite and drowsiness. These are usually temporary.

Trazodone - a serotonin antagonist and reuptake inhibitor, trazodone is a sedative and antidepressant. This is a shorter-acting drug that can be given long-term on a twice-daily basis or can be given before a triggering event on an as-needed basis.

WHAT WILL WORSEN YOUR DOG'S ANXIETY

- Physical punishment and aversive or forceful training (prong collars, shock collars, choke chains, leash corrections, scruffing, alpha rolling, yelling, hitting, etc)
- Not meeting your dog's needs for love, attention, play, exercise, mental stimulation, etc.
- Forcing your dog to confront their anxiety. If your dog is anxious around new people, and you hold his collar and force him to be petted by strangers, the anxiety will significantly increase, and in the dog's panic to get away, they may resort to aggression. This technique is called flooding, and it is considered ineffective and inhumane. If you're afraid of spiders, would it help reduce your fear of spiders to be locked in a box and have spiders dumped on you? No, probably not.
- Getting angry, stressed, or upset with your dog. They are looking to you for guidance. A calm, relaxed demeanor will help reduce your dog's anxiety.

