

Separation Anxiety in Cats

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Many people are familiar with separation anxiety in dogs, but assume it does not occur in cats. However, recent research by veterinary behaviorists suggests that separation anxiety may also develop in cats. Contrary to what had often been thought in the past, cats are actually very social creatures and can form strong bonds with people and with other animals. While there is certainly more research to be done in this area, this syndrome could be an important consideration for those dealing with anxiety-related feline behavior problems.

What are the signs of separation anxiety in cats?

Signs of separation anxiety in cats may occur when the cat is separated from its owner or another companion pet with whom it has a strong bond. A cat with separation anxiety may insist on being with the owner at all times, even following the owner from room to room. When the owner gets ready to leave the house, the cat may sulk and hide, or try to get between the owner and the door. When the owner returns, the cat may show an abnormally enthusiastic greeting.



Some of the behavioral problems triggered by separation anxiety in cats are the same as those seen in dogs: vocalizing after the owner leaves, [inappropriate urination](#) or defecation (sometimes near a door or on the owner's personal items), and, less often, destructiveness (chewing, scratching). Cats may also show their distress in other, less obvious ways such as becoming too anxious to eat when left alone; or vomiting only when the owner is not there. A less common sign in cats may be excessive grooming, to the point of creating a bald spot on one or two areas of the body.

What causes separation anxiety?

It is not known for sure what causes separation anxiety in cats. It has been speculated that there may be both genetic and environmental factors involved. Being orphaned or being weaned early may predispose a kitten to developing separation anxiety. While future research will give us more information, for now, the best prevention is to try to start out with a kitten that is well-socialized and thus hopefully will be less likely to develop behavior problems of any type.

What should I do if I suspect my cat has separation anxiety?

The first step is to discuss the situation with your veterinarian and have your cat undergo a complete physical examination. It is important to make sure that your cat's behavior is not due to an underlying physical problem. For example, a cat which is urinating outside the litter box and/or doing a lot of howling may be developing a urinary tract obstruction or infection. A cat that is over-grooming may have a food allergy. Your veterinarian may recommend some tests including a [complete blood count](#), a [chemistry profile](#), [urinalysis](#), thyroid testing, or a blood pressure check. Because separation anxiety in cats is just beginning to be studied, you may find it helpful to work with an animal behaviorist, who can help you to rule out other types of anxiety-related behaviors.

How is separation anxiety treated?

In dogs, the most effective therapy for separation anxiety often involves a combination of behavior modification and anti-anxiety medication. It is likely that this would be true in the case of cats as well.

It may be possible to make the time surrounding the owner's departure less stressful for the cat, by making some changes in the normal routine. For 15 minutes prior to leaving and upon returning home, the owner should ignore the cat. Leaving a distracting toy can be helpful. An empty toilet paper roll with the ends closed off and holes in the sides can be filled with various types and sizes of treats, which will fall out as the cat plays with the roll. There are also commercial food-dispensing toys available which are used in similar ways, e.g., Kongs and Buster Cubes. Another option is to hide very tasty food treats (cooked chicken) in various places in the house. Other toys the cat especially likes should be taken out just before the owner leaves and put away once the owner returns. When the owner returns, the cat should basically be ignored for approximately 15 minutes.



Making the cat's environment more stimulating may help, also. A comfortable perch that allows a view from a window can provide entertainment, especially if there is a bird feeder in sight. Climbing ledges or carpeted towers with attached toys can be fun also. Leaving a radio or TV on softly can be comforting; some cats enjoy "cat videos" with sounds and pictures of birds and other small creatures. Some cats may be less anxious with another animal in the house, but this depends on the individual cat and may or may not be a good solution.

In some cases, anti-anxiety medication may also be needed for a short time period. These medications may include [Buspar](#), [Prozac](#), and [Clomicalm](#). These are not labeled specifically for use in cats, and their use must be prescribed and monitored by your veterinarian.

Future research will give us more information about the incidence, cause, and treatment of separation anxiety in cats, and help us to make life better for our feline friends.

