

Fears, Phobias, and Anxiety in Cats and Dogs

What is fear?

Fear is an emotion triggered by the perception of a threat. Fear is a basic, primal emotion that serves an adaptive purpose: it induces physiological and behavioral changes that prepare an animal to quickly react to danger.

How does the body respond to fear?

Fear triggers a cascade of physiological changes that prepare an animal for fight or flight. These changes may include:

- An increase in heart rate and respiratory rate (panting)
- Dilation of pupils
- Urination or defecation
- Release of odiferous secretions from the anal sacs

How do dogs and cats signal that they are frightened?

Frightened dogs and cats use body language to communicate that they are afraid. They may pace, fidget, freeze, or attempt to hide or flee. Subtle communications exhibited by fearful dogs and cats may include avoiding eye contact, looking away, lowering their head or body, tucking their tail, pinning back their ears, licking their lips, and yawning.

Sometimes, a fearful dog or cat will attempt to fight. This aggressive response stems from a need to create distance from a threat and is most often exhibited when there is no option to flee or escape. When escape has been repeatedly blocked or if subtle communications are repeatedly ignored, an aggressive response may become a fearful pet's first reaction to a threat. A dog or cat that immediately lunges in the face of a threat may appear offensive, but may actually be very fearful.

What is maladaptive fear?

Sometimes, a dog or cat exhibits signs of fear to a stimulus that is not dangerous. They react out of proportion to the actual threat. An exaggerated fear response can compromise a pet's physical and emotional health and is considered to be maladaptive. Maladaptive fear can lead to hypervigilance and chronic stress. Pets that are excessively fearful may refrain from participating in social interactions or may exhibit unexpected aggressive responses.

What is a phobia?

A phobia is a persistent, exaggerated fear response that may be so extreme it is debilitating. Genetics and life experiences both contribute to the development of phobias. Common triggers for phobias include traveling in the car or loud noises such as thunderstorms.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is an emotion triggered by the *anticipation* of a fear-inducing stimulus. Anxiety may be situational (context-specific) and manifest only in specific contexts, such as being examined by a veterinarian or being left alone. Or anxiety may be generalized and manifest in many situations or in response to many triggers.

Anxious pets and fearful pets exhibit the same physiological and behavioral signs; the difference is that anxious dogs and cats exhibit these signs even when the trigger is not yet present. Underlying anxiety can contribute to many behavioral signs and syndromes, such as nocturnal wakefulness, excessive vocalization, and house soiling. If your dog or cat exhibits signs of behavioral illness, it is important to seek professional help to accurately identify the underlying emotional components.

What types of stimuli might trigger a fear, phobic, or anxious response?

There are many potential triggers for fear, anxiety, and phobia. Pets may be fearful of strangers, children, unfamiliar objects, or novel environments. Some dogs and cats become fearful or anxious when they visit the veterinary hospital or grooming parlor. Many dogs and cats exhibit signs of anxiety when they are left alone. Thunderstorms, fireworks, and chirping batteries are common triggers for phobic responses, especially in dogs.

What causes fearful, phobic, or anxious responses?

Any unpleasant or fear-inducing experience can trigger a persistent fear.

- Dogs and cats may associate the experience of fear with an innocuous nearby trigger. For instance, if a loud noise occurs nearby while a cat is using its litter box, the cat may become frightened and refuse to use the litter box in the future, even though the box did not create the sound. Fear responses can occur from just one exposure to a trigger or may gradually increase with continued exposures.
- Another potential cause for a persistent fear response is punishment. If a dog or cat is scolded when a neutral stimulus is nearby, such as a person or moving vehicle, the dog or cat may develop a fear of people or vehicles, respectively.
- Fear can also be caused by the absence of positive or neutral exposure to a stimulus. Young puppies and kittens are particularly sensitive to neutral and positive exposures and may develop fear of people, places, and objects that they did not encounter during their sensitive period for socialization. An individual puppy or kitten may be predisposed to developing fear based on their genetics, early nutrition, and the health and behavior of their mother.
- Underlying illness or pain can contribute to fear or anxiety and should be considered if your adult or senior dog or cat develops a new or heightened fear response to a trigger. Senior pets may experience sensory changes that alter their perception of stimuli.

If you notice that your dog or cat exhibits signs of fear, particularly if the fear is extreme or has started recently, it is important to consult with your veterinarian. A physical examination and laboratory testing will uncover underlying medical conditions that could cause or contribute to the fear.

Is it possible to prevent fears, phobias, and anxieties?

Socializing young puppies and kittens may help prevent certain fears from developing. Socialization experiences should be provided gently so that they do not evoke fear.

Introduce your dog and cat to people and places. Expose them to many novel sounds - you may use downloaded recordings of thunder, fireworks, traffic, children, and noisy crowds. Pair stimuli with food and toys to create a positive association. If they appear frightened during a recording or in a live situation, it is important to remain calm yet cheerful. Remove the trigger and allow them to recover before restarting at a lower intensity. If you notice a high-level fear response or if your pet does not recover quickly, discontinue all exposures until you have a chance to consult with a professional.

Can fears and phobias be treated?

Mild fear, particularly fear of a single trigger, can often be treated with behavior modification. Extreme fears, fear of multiple triggers, anxiety in multiple contexts, and phobias all require professional guidance. Dogs and cats that experience phobias often benefit from a combination of behavior modification and medication, as their reactions are out of proportion to the trigger. **To begin treatment:**

- Identify the triggers for your pet's fear response. Try to avoid these stimuli and situations until treatment has been completed successfully.
- Classical conditioning can help with mild fear. Feed your pet delicious food treats when the trigger is present to form a positive association.
- For moderate and high-level fear, a desensitization and counterconditioning program can be used to systematically expose your dog or cat to triggers. This technique begins with exposure at such a low intensity that your pet does not experience fear and can easily take a tasty food treat. Over time, the intensity of the trigger is gradually increased. Professional guidance is advised to be sure that the pace is adequate - moving ahead too quickly can result in heightened fear.
- Remain steady and calm when your dog or cat is unexpectedly faced with a trigger. Use gently petting or let your pet lean on you if that helps her relax but avoid fussing. Once your pet recovers, try offering a treat but do not offer food if your pet is too worried to take it.
- Do not attempt to scold or otherwise punish your frightened pet.
- Medications designed to reduce anxiety can be used in the face of unavoidable triggers such as thunder. Each fear-inducing exposure can contribute to the intensity of future responses; using medication may prevent this escalation.