

Barking

What are the Causes of Problem Barking at Home?

It is normal for dogs to bark, whine, growl and yelp. Vocalizing becomes a problem when it annoys people, or when the dog is distressed. Problem barking can stem from a medical problem such as pain, discomfort or an illness. It can also stem from a psychological cause such as fear or boredom. Sometimes it is instinctual, such as when a dog is guarding its territory.

What Can You Do About Your Dog's Problem Barking?

What you do about your dog's barking depends on the cause of the barking. Consult your veterinarian to determine if there is a medical cause. If there is no medical problem, consult a behaviorist, who will be able to help you determine what the actual cause is and what potential solutions are.

Fear or Anxiety Barking: Dogs may bark, whine, or even howl when they are frightened or stressed. Separation anxiety is a common reason for excessive barking when dogs are home alone. Dogs often bark at frightening noises such as thunder or the sounds from hot air balloons. These dogs will look fearful, with their ears back and tails tucked, and may also be trying to escape or avoid whatever is frightening them. Speak with your behaviorist. Common methods of working with fear or anxiety barking are slowly counterconditioning the dog to get used to the thing she's fearful of (loud noises mean yummy treats instead of fear), giving her more exercise before you leave (it's harder for a very tired dog to be anxious or fearful), and training her to perform an alternate behavior to deal with the fear (for example, teach her to go to her crate when she gets fearful about a person walking by and reward her for that). Never, never use punishment to stop fearful behavior, as it will only increase the fear and not help provide any outlet for it. If the fear or anxiety is very high, you may also want to speak with your veterinarian about the possibility of medication that can be used in conjunction with behavior modification to reduce your dog's fear or anxiety.

Boredom and Frustration Barking Dogs frequently bark or howl because they have too much energy bottled up inside them, are bored and need attention, or because they see something they really want (like a squirrel in a tree). While barking, the dogs may appear excited or friendly. Frustration and attention getting barking may be accompanied by other behaviors such as jumping, running or pawing. One course of action is to change your dog's routine to better meet his behavioral needs. Give your dog more activities to occupy his time, and more social and play time with you. Consider more interactive, food filled toys your dog can spend time coaxing tidbits from. Protect your dog from whatever is frustrating him. How to do so will depend on the specifics of your dog's behavior and his environment. Some dogs are less frustrated when they can see things; others are just the opposite. Closing or opening drapes and blinds, leaving your dog inside, leaving a radio or television on to mask noises your dog may be barking at are all options.

Territorial Barking: Barking when a person or animal comes near or into the home can be motivated by fear or by territorial guarding. If your dog is fearful, her ears may be back, she may bark and retreat. To deal with fear barking, see the fear section above. If your dog is not fearful, she may simply be protecting her territory. The guarding of resources like home territory is a very natural dog behavior. In this case, you do need to teach your dog that the resource belongs to you, not to him, by teaching and reinforcing alternate behavior. Some dogs are bred to alert you to potential danger. With these dogs, it can be possible to reward them for one alarm bark followed by silence—in other words, to train them to alert you, get their thanks, and move on, rather than to continue to alert. With any type of territorial barking, whether it is motivated by fear or not, it is extremely likely that if you intend to have people enter your house you'll need to consult a behaviorist in order to maintain everyone's safety. Barking can be a prelude to biting, and even the sweetest dog in the world might bite if pushed to their limit.

OCD: Barking for any reason can sometimes become a compulsive disorder. In these cases, the barking is quite repetitive and the dogs may engage in other repetitive behaviors such as running in circles or jumping at the walls. Talk to your behaviorist and also your vet, as in severe cases there are medications that can help with OCD.

General Tips to Remember: Socialization goes a long way to prevent barking, because it will help keep a dog from getting overly aroused around certain people, animals or situations. Even before there's any problem barking, socialize your dog well around all types of things—this may prevent problem barking from ever occurring. Learning to be alone is also very important for dogs; practicing being alone for short periods which stretch into longer periods is important for any dog. Don't inadvertently reward barking by providing your dog with whatever they're asking for—this will lead them to consistently use it as a tool. Don't forget that there may be a medical cause for the barking. Finally, please only consider suppressing barking with

carefully considered and limited use of punishment followed by wonderful rewards for being quiet ONLY if you completely understand the cause of the barking, the cause is not fear or anxiety, and you're working with a trained behaviorist so that you don't do more harm than good. Barking is a symptom, not the cause, of a problem—so work on fixing the cause itself and you'll end up with a happy, healthy dog.