

# What You Need to Know if Your Dog Stays Home Alone

Many dogs spend most of their waking hours home alone while their humans work, but is it okay? Can too much time alone lead to isolation distress and anxiety? What's the longest a dog should go without a potty break? Here are seven options to consider if your dog spends time at home alone.

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many dog behavior experts, and lots of pet parents as well, are concerned about the effect on dogs of being left home alone for long stretches
- Dogs left alone for several hours a day can suffer from isolation distress
- The truth is that 10 to 12 hours is too long to leave a dog alone, and dogs need to have an opportunity to relieve themselves every 4 to 6 hours
- Crate training your dog is great, but leaving her confined to her crate all day is something she just doesn't deserve
- There are many options that will limit your dog's time at home alone, including doggy daycare, a dog walker or sitter, and/or working from home or taking your dog to work with you

In an article for Whole Dog Journal, full-time trainer and behavior consultant Nancy Tucker, CDBC, CPDT-KA, asks an important question many pet parents also wrestle with:

*"How much isolation a dog can and should endure are two different things. How much time does your dog spend home alone? Is your dog experiencing isolation distress?"<sup>1</sup>*

## Many Dog Guardians Work All Day Outside the Home

I realize this is a sensitive issue for many dog parents, and for good reason. Many people who **adopt a dog from a shelter** or rescue work outside the home, go to school, or are involved in other activities that take them away from their houses for several hours, several days a week.

By necessity, they must leave their dogs behind, but since they've given an abandoned or unwanted dog a loving home, they feel it's unfair to criticize them for leaving their pet alone for long stretches.

I understand where these pet parents are coming from, and I agree that it's certainly better for a dog to be in a forever home than a shelter. I don't pretend to have all the answers to the problem of dogs left alone all day, but as a wellness veterinarian and animal advocate, I can't in good conscience just ignore the issue for fear of making someone angry or hurting their feelings.

My goal is simply to help dog guardians see the home-alone situation through their pet's eyes, and hopefully offer some suggestions you may not have thought of as alternatives to leaving your canine family member at home alone all day. As Tucker points out:

*"A lot of dogs might spend most of their waking hours home alone and seem to do just fine, but is it okay? Are they really fine? I sometimes wonder if, instead, this is something we say to ourselves to assuage our guilt, or to avoid taking a harder look at a cultural norm that could use an update."*

## **Isolation Distress Differs From Separation Anxiety**

It's important to note that a dog can be distressed while home alone without developing full-blown **separation anxiety**. Distress is a milder form of stress and anxiety, whereas dogs with separation anxiety can have the canine version of a panic attack when their human isn't around. According to Pat Miller, another animal behavior expert who writes for Whole Dog Journal:

*"The distinction between 'isolation' and 'separation' is equally important. Isolation distress means the dog doesn't want to be left alone - any ol' human will do for company, and sometimes even another dog will fill the bill.*

*True separation distress or anxiety means the dog is hyper-bonded to one specific person, and continues to show stress behaviors if that person is absent, even if other humans or dogs are present."*<sup>2</sup>

## **10 to 12 Uninterrupted Hours Alone Is Too Long**

Not so long ago, no one gave a second thought to leaving a dog home alone for a day or two with a supply of kibble and plenty of water to drink. It just didn't occur to pet owners to wonder how their dog felt being left alone, whether indoors or outside.

Fortunately, these days most people know better than to leave their dog alone for such a long stretch, but it's very common for dogs to be left home for 8 or 10 or 12 hours, up to five or six days a week.

And depending on the owner's lifestyle, he or she may arrive home after 10 hours, give the dog a quick walk and dinner, and then go back out for the evening. (Of course, on the flip side, there are also dog parents who turn down social invitations to spend evenings and weekends with their pet.)

*"Here's the thing," writes Tucker, "and I won't pull any punches: 10 to 12 hours is too long for a dog to be alone in a single stretch." I agree. Of course, as she goes on to say, there are plenty of people who argue they've always left their dogs, with no issues.*

*"What this means, though" says Tucker, "is that the dogs who appear to be fine have simply learned to cope with something that is entirely out of their control. Being left alone for long stretches of time is not a likely choice that they would make if it was up to them. They've adapted to our routines, but it's far from ideal for them." Again, I have to agree.*

*Tucker also writes, "We count on our dogs to be there for us when we're ready to interact with them, but in between those moments, we expect them to do nothing and wait. It's a tall order, but lucky for us, most dogs adapt incredibly well to anything we ask them to."*

## Dogs Need Potty Breaks Every 4 to 6 Hours

There's no established rule for the maximum amount of time a dog can be left alone in a single stretch. Each dog is an individual, and some manage or cope better than others when left alone.

Obviously, potty breaks are a necessity. Most healthy adult dogs need 3 to 5 opportunities each day to pee and/or poop. Older dogs and those with certain conditions such as urinary incontinence need to go out more often. Generally speaking, dogs shouldn't go without a potty break for more than 4 or 6 hours. (Please note I'm only discussing adult dogs here, since it goes without saying that puppies — for a multitude of reasons — shouldn't be left alone.)

It's important to realize that while your dog can "hold it" for longer periods, he really shouldn't have to. Imagine how you would feel if you were dependent on someone else to give you permission to go to the bathroom, and often that person made you wait long past the point at which you became uncomfortable "holding it." Beyond four hours without a potty break, and certainly beyond six, most home-alone dogs become uncomfortable.

Beyond the potty break issue, the fact is that dogs are social creatures who need opportunities to interact with people several times a day, and many also benefit from interaction with other dogs as well.

## A Crate is No Place for a Dog to Spend an Entire Day

Some dog parents resort to confining their pet to a crate while they're gone all day. This is often in response to damage the dog has done around the home when left alone to entertain himself. However, behavior issues created by isolation distress or plain old boredom are only made worse by crate confinement, and in addition, it increases the dog's stress level.

*"A crate is no place for a dog to spend an entire day," writes Tucker. "If necessary, confinement in a small space should be temporary and for short periods of time, say, a couple of hours, tops."*

Even if your dog is crate trained and loves go in there to nap or avoid the vacuum, and even if she's confined to her crate at night in your bedroom as you sleep, it's a whole different ballgame locking her in there for the entire day while you're away. Tucker makes this very apt comparison:

*"... I have a favorite chair in the living room where I sometimes like to curl up and take a nap. My choosing to spend time relaxed in a space without budging for sometimes an entire hour is a far cry from being physically confined to that chair, unable to leave it to stretch, eat, drink, relieve myself, or just plain do something else. It's time we rethink the use of crates and our dependence on them."*

For the record, I'm a big advocate of crate training, however, like Tucker, I certainly don't believe in using one to confine a dog for long periods. But providing your dog with her very own cozy space and making it a pleasant place to be has a number of advantages for both of you. A crate can help not only with housetraining, but also car or plane travel, and overnight stays with friends, family or at a pet-friendly hotel.

## Options for Home-Along Dogs

I recognize that the following suggestions won't be easy or even possible for everyone to do. Finding alternatives to leaving your dog home alone will depend on your budget, your freedom to manage your time during the day, your family and social support system, and other factors.

- **See if your employer will let you work from home some or all of the time** — Depending on the kind of work you do, you may be able to do it effectively from home. If so, ask your boss if he or she would be amenable. You'll never know if you don't ask!
- **See if you can bring your dog to work with you** — Again, this depends on the kind of work you do, who you work for, and whether your employer might be open to having dogs in the workplace. (Obviously, if you work for yourself, you can give yourself permission!)
- **Come home for lunch** — If your workplace is close enough, consider returning home at lunchtime to walk your dog and spend some time interacting with him.
- **Ask a stay-at-home family member or friend to dog-sit** — Is there anyone in your family or circle of friends who likes dogs (including yours), is home a lot, and would be willing to care for your dog a few days a week? Perhaps you can offer the person something they need in return, such as pet- or babysitting services.
- **Arrange for someone to stop by and walk your dog** — This could be a friendly neighbor or anyone you know and trust who likes dogs and would be willing to give yours some attention a few days a week. You can also offer to pay a responsible neighborhood child or teen to do it.
- **Hire a professional dog walker** — There are a lot of dog walking services around these days, depending on where you live. If you decide to go this route, be sure to do your homework and find a reputable one.
- **Enroll your pet in doggy daycare** — If your dog enjoys interacting and playing with other dogs, a doggy daycare once or twice a week can be a godsend. "Look for clean, well-designed locations with qualified staff who will manage interactions between the dogs and provide necessary rest periods," advises Tucker.

### Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [Whole Dog Journal, January 10, 2020](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Whole Dog Journal, September 25, 2019](#)

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