

Why Are so Many Dogs Going Gray as Early as Age 1?

If your dog shows signs of early graying, even as young as age 1, you're not alone. A recent study tried to find the common denominators in early graying dogs. And what they found is as fascinating as it is disturbing. Here's what you need to know now, even if your dog isn't gray yet.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A recent study examined the premature graying of dogs in the U.S.
- The researchers concluded that fearfulness, anxiety and impulsivity are significant factors in dogs that begin to go gray around the muzzle between the ages of 2 and 4
- The researchers hope their study results will prompt owners, veterinarians and others to assess prematurely graying dogs for issues with fear and anxiety
- There are many things dog guardians can do to help relieve stress in a fearful, anxious dog

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published February 10, 2017.

If you're familiar with the term "the graying of America," you know it refers to the fact that the American population is increasingly dominated by older people. In other words, the median age of Americans is going up.

But what about the graying of America's dogs? Have you noticed all the white muzzles out there these days? Have you been surprised to learn a very gray dog is just 5 or 6 years old? What's going on?

Study Looks at Why Some Dogs Go Gray at a Young Age

A recent study published in the journal Applied Animal Behaviour Science is one of the first that attempts to explain why some dogs experience premature graying of the muzzle.¹

The team of four researchers included Temple Grandin, Ph.D., of Colorado State University's Department of Animal Sciences. Grandin is also a world-renowned autism spokesperson.

The study involved 400 dogs aged 1 to 4 years who were recruited through flyers placed at veterinary clinics, dog shows and dog parks.

Pictures of the dogs from the front and side were taken so an assessment could be made of the amount of graying on the muzzle of each dog. Based on the assessments, the dogs were put in one of four categories:

1. No Gray

2. Frontal Gray
3. Half Gray
4. Full Gray

The study did not include light-colored dogs whose degree of grayness couldn't be determined.

Each of the dogs' guardians was asked to complete a questionnaire ostensibly about their dog's lifestyle. The survey included questions about anxiety, fear and impulsiveness, but to prevent bias, the owners weren't aware of the actual intended topic of the study.

Examples of questions to determine whether a dog was anxious included **destructive behavior when left at home**, hair loss due to the stress of a veterinary visit or being in a new place and cringing or cowering in the presence of groups of people.

Examples of questions to gauge a dog's impulsivity included jumping on people, inability to calm down, loss of focus and hyperactivity after exercise.

Premature Graying Is a Hallmark of Fearful, Anxious and Impulsive Dogs

When the researchers compared the answers to the questionnaires with the dogs' grayness scores, they made two important discoveries:

- The dogs described as fearful, anxious and impulsive had more gray on their muzzles.
- The dogs who were fearful of a particular stimuli, for example, loud noises (but interestingly, not thunderstorms) or strangers, were also more likely to have a gray muzzle.

The researchers concluded that the extent of muzzle grayness was "significantly and positively predicted" by anxiety and impulsivity.

Fear of loud noises and unfamiliar animals and people was also associated with increased grayness. "Premature graying in young dogs may be a possible indicator of anxiety, fear or impulsivity issues in dogs under [4] years of age," the study authors concluded.

Though the dogs in the study were relatively young, their age did influence the extent of grayness (i.e., the 4 year-old-dogs were more gray than the 1-year-olds), and female dogs were more gray than males. Factors that did not appear to make a difference included the dogs' size, spay/neuter status or overall health.

Young, Graying Dogs Should Be Assessed for Fearful, Anxious Behaviors

Hopefully this research can help us help anxious, fearful dogs, who spend a good portion of the day feeling uncomfortable and off-balance.

If dog parents, shelter workers, veterinarians, behaviorists, trainers and other dog advocates become aware that a young dog with premature graying may have issues with anxiety, fear, and impulsivity, they are in a better position to offer or find help to alleviate the animal's stress.

Lead study author Dr. Camille King, who runs an animal behavior practice in the Denver area, believes this research confirms her experience over two decades of working with dogs. Those who display signs of stress tend to start going gray as early as 2 years of age.

The researchers believe more studies are needed, especially to determine whether separation anxiety or impulsivity is the more significant factor in premature graying. King hopes guardians of young dogs who notice premature graying will consult with a veterinarian or animal behaviorist about ways to ease their pet's stress.

Tips to Help Anxious, Fearful Dogs

In addition to behavior modification (for example, avoidance of triggers, desensitization and/or counterconditioning), there are many things you can do to help alleviate stress in your anxious or fearful dog. For dogs with separation anxiety:

- Leave your dog with an article of clothing or blanket with your scent on it.
- Leave a treat-release toy for your dog to focus on in your absence. Place small treats around the house for her to discover, along with her favorite toys.
- Add a flower essence blend like Separation Anxiety from Spirit Essences to her drinking water. This works wonders for some dogs. And put on some soothing doggy music before you leave.
- Invest in an Adaptil collar or diffuser for your dog. These products release a pheromone that's designed to have a calming effect on dogs.
- Make sure your dog gets plenty of exercise, playtime, mental stimulation and TLC. The more full her life is when you're around, the calmer she'll be when you're not.

For dogs with noise phobia:

- Play calm, soothing music before a possible stressor occurs. This may relax your dog and have the added bonus of drowning out distressing noises.
- If your dog seems to respond well to pressure applied to her body, there are wraps available (e.g., Thundershirt, TTouch anxiety wrap) that many pet owners and veterinarians find extremely helpful.
- TTouch is a specific massage technique that can help anxious pets.
- Consult your holistic vet about homeopathic, TCM (traditional Chinese medicine) and Bach flower remedies that could be helpful in alleviating your dog's stress. Products I use, always in conjunction with behavior modification, include homeopathic aconitum, Hyland's Calms Forte, Rescue Remedy or other similar remedies depending on the animal.
- Calming nutraceuticals and herbs that can be of benefit include holy basil, L-theanine, rhodiola, ashwagandha, GABA, 5-HTP and chamomile. Consult your holistic vet about which makes sense for your pet.
- The essential oil of lavender has also been proven to reduce a dog's stress response. I recommend placing a few drops on your dog's collar or bedding before a stressor occurs, if possible, or diffuse the oil around your house for an overall calming effect.

If you've adopted a dog who may have had a rocky start in life, I also highly recommend a program called A Sound Beginning, which was lovingly and expertly designed to help **rescue dogs and adoptive guardians learn to communicate effectively** and form an unbreakable bond.

Sources and References

[The Bark, December 7, 2016](#)

[Chicago Tribune, December 30, 2016](#)

¹ [Applied Animal Behaviour Science, Volume 185, December 2016, Pages 78-85](#)
