



# LABRADOR RETRIEVER Update

A NESTLÉ PURINA PUBLICATION DEDICATED TO LABRADOR RETRIEVER ENTHUSIASTS

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## COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Its Effect on Dog Behavior



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# THE EFFECT OF COVID-19

## ON PUPPY DEMAND & SOCIALIZATION



***“Sky” (Stoic’s Clear Blue Sky), pictured at 4 months of age, was raised during the pandemic. Breeder-owner Kari Holcomb took the male Curly-Coated Retriever puppy everywhere she could for social exposure.***

The high demand for puppies brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic has yet to slow down. In many homes, owners have been inseparable from their dogs for months. Thus, it’s not surprising that there has been a counterpoint surge in owners seeking the professional services of dog trainers and veterinary behavior specialists to help them learn to train their dogs and to deal with problem behaviors.

Kari Holcomb, a breeder of Curly-Coated Retrievers in Johnson Creek, Wisconsin, receives numerous calls daily from people wanting a puppy. “Typically, people interested in a Curly pup have done a lot of legwork to find us and to determine that the breed is a good

fit for their family,” she says. “There’s a real sense of impulse buying today.

“In our small breeding program, by the time someone gets a puppy, we’ve known them for about eight months. Importantly, we help them have the resources they need to be successful with their puppy. This means we guide them toward puppy classes and obedience training and are always available to take any questions they may have.”

Holcomb and her husband, Zach, breed Curlies under the Stoic prefix focusing on producing dogs that are competitive at dog shows and successful in hunting tests. They also run a training program, Stoic Gundogs, in which they train upland bird dogs and

retrievers. “We are booked out for months,” Holcomb says, “and not just for traditional gundog training.”

Early in 2021, the Holcombs noticed some of their new charges that had arrived for training, young dogs around 1½ years of age, were undersocialized. “For these dogs, the first week in a kennel was really stressful. Some had never been in a crate and were used to eating on their own schedule,” she says.

They also experienced a novel onslaught of requests from new dog owners for housetraining of 8- to 10-week-old puppies. “We usually never take dogs under 6 months of age, and housetraining puppies is not among the services we typically offer,” Holcomb says. “People were calling who had no interest in housetraining their puppies or teaching them basics like how to walk on a leash or good manners. I worked with a few of these puppies on a one-by-one basis in our home. COVID set the stage, but ultimately, some of these new dog owners were not prepared for having a pet.”

The lack of puppy socialization opportunities when the pandemic began snuck up on even experienced dog breeders and owners. Heidi Hartman of Harbor Run Retrievers in Lawtons, New York, bred and raised three litters right before and during the early months of the pandemic. She kept two Labrador Retriever females with the intent of finishing their show champion titles and eventually breeding them.

“As breeders, we know there is a critical socialization period to introduce puppies to a myriad of new experiences,” Hartman says. “When this should have happened with my puppies, I was focused on keeping us healthy. As a result, these dogs don’t have the confidence they should have. To get them over this, I am starting slowly with classes in agility and trick dog to help build their confidence.”

The first crucial window for puppy socialization falls between 8 and 11 weeks of age, when pups are prone to developing fears related to novel environments, novel experiences and new people if they are not exposed. The greater the variety of social exposure a puppy receives during this time — assuming the dog is enjoying it and

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## TIPS ON WAYS TO HELP REDUCE ANXIETY IN DOGS

- Schedule a veterinary examination to check for conditions that could cause stress and to discuss your dog’s physical and behavioral health
- Practice a predictable, consistent schedule with set times for eating, exercise and play
- Prepare for changes in routine such as going back to work by gradually increasing time spent in a crate or alone to minimize anxiety and smooth the transition; note that not every dog should be or needs to be in a crate, though it is important that the dog is comfortable in your absence
- Slowly expose your dog to new situations, people and dogs, giving plenty of praise and rewards for good behavior, including opportunities to reward spontaneous good behavior such as when a dog is sleeping
- If you recognize your dog may have a behavioral problem, seek help right away from a [board-certified specialist in behavior medicine](#) who is trained to address the problem and prescribe medications as needed





## STEPS TO HELP DOGS RECOVER FROM SEPARATION ANXIETY

Separation anxiety in dogs is often idiopathic, meaning the reason it occurs is not understood. Veterinary behaviorists are just beginning to learn whether COVID-19 led to behavioral changes in some dogs that qualify as separation anxiety and panic disorders. Some dogs at risk may not yet show signs because their owners have yet to leave them alone to return to a normal routine.

### SIGNS OF SEPARATION ANXIETY IN DOGS

- Whining, barking, howling, and yipping
- Destruction of objects in the house or the house itself including doors, walls and windows
- Urination and defecation
- Vomiting and salivation
- Continuous pacing
- Shutdown behavior or complete inactivity

The good news is that it is possible to teach dogs they don't have to be anxious, scared or fearful. "Dogs with separation anxiety can improve to the point it is not recognizable they had a problem," says Karen L. Overall, VMD, PhD, DACVB, a board-certified veterinary behaviorist who specializes in the treatment and prevention of stress and anxiety in dogs.

"To successfully treat a dog with separation anxiety, you also have to treat the panic they are experiencing," Dr. Overall says. "This is important because the medications used to treat panic are dif-

ferent from those used to treat anxiety-related conditions. If both panic and separation anxiety are issues, a dog will need both types of medications in addition to behavior modification. Dogs with separation anxiety may also be anxious to noise and storm phobias and/or other anxiety-related conditions."

Working with a veterinary behaviorist or a team approach with a veterinarian and trainer certified for helping dogs with anxiety disorders can produce measurable results. Dr. Overall has developed a multistep protocol for treating dogs with separation anxiety as described here, though a treatment plan varies for individual dogs. She notes that treatment is likely to be a lifelong process, as an anxious dog may relapse when there are changes such as the death of a person or dog or when a family member moves.

### Step 1: Behavior Modification

Behavior modification centers on teaching a dog to be calm, to sit or lie down, and to stay relaxed while the owner engages in a variety of behaviors, including some that may be upsetting to the dog. The single most important part of treating an anxious dog is to reward the dog when he is calm — even if the behavior is spontaneous and not requested, such as when a dog is napping.

The more relaxed behaviors a dog incorporates into daily life, the better. Owners should work a few minutes every day on helping a dog to relax. Once a dog achieves calm behavior, you can gradually teach a dog that he can be left alone for increasing increments of time without experiencing distress. Relaxation

is key, as for most dogs leaving is not the problem. Rather, the problem is the panic that may start as soon as the owner gives signals of preparing to leave.

### **Step 2: Protecting Your Dog When Left Alone**

Safety comes first. Some dogs destroy objects in a house as well as the house itself, including walls, doors and windows. Destructive behavior potentially puts a dog at risk for injury, and once destructive behavior begins, it is likely to continue and become progressively worse.

If possible, crate or isolate the dog in a small room that is safe when you are not at home. Make sure there are no dangers such as dangling cords, exposed electrical outlets, or an open toilet where a dog could drown. A dog that panics when put in an enclosed space or crate should not be forced to be crated or confined. Crates should never be used as punishment. Crates and safe rooms must be areas where a dog is content and feels secure.

### **Step 3: Provide Stimulation for the Dog**

Make sure to leave lights on in the room where a dog is confined or crated. Try leaving on the television or music. A fresh food toy can help keep an anxious dog occupied, though a distressed dog cannot eat. You will be able to tell when the dog is beginning to improve because some of the food will be gone.

### **Step 4: Alternative Coping Strategies**

Some dogs may react inappropriately only when a specific person leaves the house. If so, this person could consider bringing the dog to work. Alternatives include enrolling the dog in doggie daycare, hiring a pet sitter or dog walker, or using daytime boarding at a kennel.

### **Step 5: Bring the Outside World Inside**

Some dogs find it calming and mentally stimulating to look at the outside world. Try placing the crate by a window, French doors or sliding patio doors. A covered outdoor kennel run in a safe location may help distressed dogs that prefer the outdoors.

### **Step 6: Desensitize Your Dog to Departure Cues**

If you can teach your dog you are going to leave, you may be able to desensitize the dog to cues that are stressful, such as a ringing alarm clock or putting on work clothes. Decoupling the cues a dog associates with your leaving can help promote calmness. It is important to measure changes, which can be done by comparing videos taken of the dog for a few minutes in the same circumstances for signs of distress. Note that it is possible to sensitize dogs to your departure cues, and thus dogs may begin to react as soon as they see you anticipating them. Try changing your pattern, such as watering plants before leaving for work. Monitor the dog to determine whether she is paying more attention to you and following you. If so, you may be sensitizing her and making things worse. This is an outcome of not understanding the dog's physiological state. In these cases, some situational medication that affects arousal may help.

### **Step 7: Using Anti-Anxiety Medications**

Most dogs that experience separation anxiety require anti-anxiety medication to improve. These medications, which typically have limited side effects, offer tremendous benefits that include speeding the rate of recovery over behavior modification without medications. Some dogs may require an anti-panic medication about two hours before the owner leaves in addition to daily medication for anxiety. Noise and storm phobias are examples of types of panic conditions that may need medication on an as-needed basis.

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not scared — the more likely the puppy is to develop social flexibility, emotional stability and trainability skills. Positive development opportunities are important for puppies through 16 weeks of age and then throughout life. Social exposure reduces the number of things in the world that frighten a puppy by continually providing the experience

of first being a bit unsure and then recovering and discovering how to explore novel experiences successfully.

Not surprisingly, COVID-19 is being blamed for missed social opportunities and subsequent behavioral problems in dogs. “There are risks to having less exposure to the outside world, but it’s a mistake to attribute all bad behavior to this,” says Karen L. Overall, VMD,



PhD, DACVB, professor of veterinary behavior at the Atlantic Veterinary School of the University of Prince Edward Island in Canada. “I fear that every young dog with a behavior problem will be blamed on COVID-19 isolation.”

Dog behavior is a combination of genetics, experiences and environment. “When dogs are born, they have a set of genes that determine what can happen, not what will happen,” Dr. Overall says. “Genetics need to be considered, too. There are too many variables to blame bad dog behavior in dogs solely on lockdown-related isolation.”

A positive example is Dr. Overall’s now 1½-year-old Australian Shepherd, “Annie,” who was raised during the pandemic. “Annie spent one week out in the world with me going to the vet school before lockdown,” she says. “We took her on some car rides, but she did not go to parks, markets, city streets, or meet very many people, except our neighbors, or other dogs. But despite that relative lack of socialization, she is social, sweet, kind, and smart. She’s great with other dogs, people and new places.”

Holcomb and Hartman agree on the importance of starting early to socialize puppies. “Although we couldn’t get out as we usually do during the pandemic, I made time for my puppies to sit in a park with our other dogs,” Holcomb says. “They learned to go in a crate and the X-pen. We even slept overnight in our camper as we would if traveling to an event. I took them everywhere I could.”

Hartman, who is catching up with her Labrador Retriever females who are now 18 months and 24 months of age, says, “We are making great progress starting with companion sports rather than conformation. Because we were behind, it forced me to think differently about how to build confidence in these dogs. Reversing fears is an ongoing process, but we are getting there.” ■

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## STUDY EXAMINES EFFECT OF PANDEMIC ON DOGS’ BEHAVIOR

A study investigating the long-term effects of the pandemic on dog behavior is underway at the Atlantic Veterinary College of the University of Prince Edward Island in Canada. Lead investigator Karen L. Overall, VMC, PhD, DACVB, professor of veterinary behavior, aims to learn if changes in dog owners’ schedules requiring more time at home and then returning to work have impacted the behaviors of their dogs.

“Our questionnaire is set up to monitor dogs for changes in behaviors due to social isolation, quarantine and social distancing,” Dr. Overall says. “We are assessing patterns of anxious behaviors in dogs before the pandemic and when owners return to their normal routines.”

The 21-page questionnaire was distributed in March 2020 to hundreds of dog owners in Canada, the U.S. and Europe, with new dog entries accepted through January 2021. The study, which is expected to be completed and published in 2022, focuses on learning about changes in individual dogs that depict separation anxiety, noise phobia/reactivity, and aggression/avoidance behaviors. Participants are encouraged to update information online about their dogs every two weeks to aid the researchers in assessing rates of behavioral changes.

The analysis is centered on 100 dogs that were enrolled in the first two months of the pandemic when everything had initially closed. “We limited our focus to the first two months because this was the acute phase of a novel situation,” says Dr. Overall. “Early data review suggests what other researchers, including a group in Spain, have found: Dogs that were already prone to being anxious worsened when people were no longer staying home, and some of them worsened when people were at home.

“We have not examined human anxiety in this study, but it has been investigated in others. Humans who were anxious may have had more dogs that were anxious. It is important to note that the dogs in our study already lived with families when the pandemic hit. They were not acquired during the pandemic or as an intervention for the pandemic. This is important because owners of dogs that were already members of their family have knowledge about their dogs’ behavioral changes that may not be the same as owners of dogs that were new to their family.”

A longtime researcher of stress in dogs, Dr. Overall says, “I have spent a large part of my career trying to understand dogs’ responses to stressful circumstances and how to best treat and prevent their anxieties. Naturally, the pandemic is a period of concern in which we want to measure differences in dogs’ behaviors and learn the long-term effects of these unprecedented times, particularly if it has created separation anxiety in dogs that did not have it before.”

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\*Data was collected by Relevation Research via an online survey from August 15-19, 2018. A total of 826 nationally-representative dog owners qualified and completed the survey. Qualified participants were men and women age 18 and older, owned one or more adult dogs, were household members most responsible for taking the dog(s) to a veterinarian, and had taken the dog(s) to a veterinarian in the past 12 months.

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