

Stress Signs in Dogs

Acute stress: rapid shallow or deep forceful panting. A dog under acute stress will pant with the lips pulled back in a wide grin which causes furrows in the skin under the eyes and forehead, and the tongue is not relaxed.

Other stress signs that may be exhibited with or without acute stress:

Lack of focus or attention. He is not ignoring you. He cannot even hear you let alone pay attention to you. His attention is in a tunnel which makes it nearly impossible for him to focus on you.

Sweaty paws. You'll see it when the dog walks on a hardwood floor or on concrete. This is a product of the body forcing fluids out.

Yawning. This type of yawn tend to be more intense than a dog who just woke up from a nap. He will usually tuck his chin into his chest and yawn intensely.

Hyperactivity. This is the opposite of shutting down. A severely distress dog uses this as a coping mechanism. The dog looks frantic or panicked and you may think he's fooling around of just a hyper dog. This is the quintessential activation stress. A dog cannot maintain this for very long before the system is drained and then the dog shuts down.

Increased frequency of urination or defecation. Greater frequency is either a sign of illness or stress. Urination could be a lack of housetraining or stress. When the body is stressed, it forces fluid from itself.

Vomiting and Diarrhea. The digestive system is affected by stress and is often the first system to react poorly. Stress can be one reason other than health reasons.

Stretching. Stress tends to make muscles tense up. Stretching may be a way to relax these muscles.

Shaking as if he just came out of the water. This is the dog's attempt to shake off the stress. Dogs that finish with a tense confrontation will often give a shake.

Confusion. A dog who is over stressed may act strange or confused (the tunnel affect). There could also be a medical reason for it, like seizure or a diabetic emergency. Therefore, use caution when noting this response as a stress sign.

Self mutilation. Tail biting, chewing or licking the paw or flank. There are many reasons why a dog would mutilate itself which also includes a genetic predisposition to do so or a medical reason. It can also be learned or reinforced or be part of a compulsive disorder. A dog who has an injury or illness will self mutilate the area that causes pain. In any case, stress is also happening when the dog does this.

Excessive grooming. The grooming is usually the paws, flank or genitals. There can also be an underlying injury or illness which is the cause for the stress.

Sleeping excessively. Every dog has a different energy level, which could make picking this sign of stress out as a difficult one. Hindsight, when the dog has returned to a normal energy level, will be apparent. A dog that has a serotonin depletion will not experience a satisfying sleep, and this is why they are always trying to sleep.

Skin Disorders. It is also thought that hot spots and allergies are physical expressions of stress. When the stressful situations have been removed, often the skin disorders clear up on their own.

Immune system disorder. Many believe that autoimmune disorder is heavily correlated with chronic stress. Therefore when treating a dog with an immune system disorder, managing the stress would be a wise decision.

Obsessive/compulsive behaviors. A lot of barking, digging, tail chasing; these could be indications of high stress. It is the dog's attempt to keep stress at bay. When stressed, certain behaviors can become obsessive compulsive after a while.

Over active. A dog that cannot relax and is alert to the slightest environmental cue. This can relate to ineffective sleep patterns. You have to be aware also, of the breed as some are more hyper than others.

Shivering. Context will tell you if the dog is cold or stressed.

Displaced behaviors. A severely stressed dog may do something other than what was asked of him. This is an expression of confusion and he may not even hear you. His is acting from the influence of his limbic system rather than from his cortex.

Stress signs either show up as increased activity or as a decrease (shutting down). Under acute stress, adrenaline takes on the major role and affects nearly all that the dog does. Adrenaline is a hormone that gets released in the blood stream. When it does, the blood flow moves away from the skin and intestines and moves to the muscles in preparation for action.

Cortisol is also a hormone that is secreted from the hypothalamus during times of stress. An excess of cortisol over an extended period of time can produce all kinds of problems, one strongly suspected affect of an abundance, which causes the body to compensate, is SARDS and leaky gut syndrome. Cortisol also regulates blood pressure, glucose levels and how quickly proteins are broken down into amino acids. Cortisol also affects the pituitary gland. Cortisol is important because it is released to fight stress. Cortisol can also be released when the dog's food is wrong for him.

Under enough stress, a dog cannot think. He can only react. And the way he reacts will depend on his memory of experiences - those he figured out himself and those he was taught. There is an active relationship between the limbic system and the cortex. When one is activated, the other is inhibited. So, if the dog is thinking, he's not reacting emotionally. And when he's reacting emotionally, he's not thinking.

Stress occurs when any demand is placed on a dog to change or adjust. The stress can come from within the dog as he thinks about a demand. It can also come from outside when something in the environment places a demand on the dog. Stress is anything that impacts the dog. The level of stress tolerance is thought to be an inherited trait. Dogs that are parasympathetically dominant will be more calm and emotionally balanced. They react to their environment first. Dogs that are sympathetically dominant are more sensitive and reactive to flight-freeze-fight stimulation. They react with their emotions first.

Many shelter dogs experience a state of chronic stress. This depletes the body's valuable resources. As the stress continues, the depletion disrupts sleep patterns, makes thinking difficult and the rational activity of the mind is off. The dog can become oversensitive to pain and can show a lack of ability to experience reward or pleasure.