



How to Keep Your Dog from Escaping

First, find out how your dog is escaping. Second, figure out why.

Does your dog's ability to escape from the backyard have you convinced that they are nothing less than a hairy Houdini?

Repeat attempts to keep your pet confined to the yard may be frustrating, but every escape opens up the possibility of tragic consequences. If your dog is running loose, they are in danger of being hit by a car, injured in a fight with another dog, or hurt in any number of other ways.

You're also liable for any damage or injury your dog may cause, and you may be required to pay a fine if they are picked up by an animal control agency.

To prevent escapes, you'll need to find out how your dog is getting out of the yard, and more importantly, why they are so determined to get out.

Why dogs escape

Social isolation/frustration

Your dog may be escaping because they are bored and lonely, especially if:

- **They are left alone** for long periods of time without opportunities for interaction with you.
- **Their environment is relatively barren**, without playmates or toys.
- **They are a puppy or adolescent** (under three years old) and don't have other outlets for their energy.
- **They are a particularly active type of dog** (like the herding or sporting breed) and need an active "job" in order to be happy.
- **They visit places after each escape that provide them with interaction and fun things to do.** For example, they may go play with a neighbor's dog or visit the local school yard to play with the children.

Recommendations:

Expand your dog's world and increase their "people time" in the following ways:

- **Walk your dog daily.** It's good exercise, both mentally and physically (for both of you!).
- **Teach your dog to fetch a ball or Frisbee™** and practice with them as often as possible.

- **Teach your dog a few commands or tricks.** Try to hold a lesson every day for 5 to 10 minutes.
- **Take an obedience class with your dog** and practice what you've learned every day.
- **Provide interesting toys** (Kong™-type toys filled with treats or busy-box toys) to keep your dog busy when you're not home.
- **Rotate your dog's toys** to make them seem new and interesting.
- **Keep your dog inside when you're unable to supervise them.** This will also keep them safe and prevent any possibility of their being stolen from your yard.
- **If you must be away from home for extended periods of time, take your dog to work with you or to a "doggie day care center,"** or ask a friend or neighbor to walk your dog.

Sexual roaming

Dogs become sexually mature at around 6 months of age and intact male dogs have a strong drive to seek out females. It can be difficult to prevent an intact dog from escaping when their motivation to do so is very high.

Recommendations:

- **Have your male dog neutered.** Studies show that neutering will decrease sexual roaming in about 90 percent of cases. If intact males have established a pattern of escaping, they may continue to do so even after they are neutered; this is even more reason to have males neutered as soon as possible.
- **Have your female dog spayed.** If intact female dogs escape while they are in heat, they have a high likelihood of getting pregnant (and they could be impregnated even if they stay confined in your yard).
- **Don't accidentally contribute to the pet overpopulation problem** by allowing your female dog to breed indiscriminately. Millions of unwanted pets are euthanized every year.

Fears and phobias

Your dog may be escaping out of fear, especially if they are exposed to loud noises, such as thunderstorms, firecrackers or construction sounds.

Recommendations:

- **Identify what is frightening your dog and desensitize them to it.** You may need to seek out the help of a professional trainer, or talk to your veterinarian about anti-anxiety medications that might help your dog while you work on behavior modification.
- **Keep your dog indoors if there's any chance they may encounter the fear stimulus outside.** You can even mute thunder and other outside noises by creating a comfortable spot in a basement or windowless bathroom and turning on a television, radio or loud fan.
- **Provide a "safe place" for your dog.** Observe where they like to go when they feel anxious, then allow access to that space, or create a similar space for them to use when the fear stimulus is present.

Separation anxiety

Your dog may be trying to escape due to separation anxiety if:

- **They escape as soon as, or shortly after, you leave.**
- **They display other behaviors that reflect a strong attachment to you**, such as following you around, greeting you wildly, or reacting anxiously to your preparations to leave.
- **They remain near your home after they have escaped.**

Factors that can precipitate a separation anxiety problem:

- **Your family's schedule has changed**, and that has resulted in your dog being left alone more often.
- **Your family has recently moved to a new house.**
- **Your family has experienced the death or loss of a family member or another pet.**
- **Your dog has recently spent time at an animal shelter or boarding kennel.**

Recommendations:

If your dog has been correctly diagnosed as suffering from separation anxiety, you can solve the problem using counter-conditioning and desensitization techniques.

How dogs escape

Some dogs jump fences, but most actually climb them, using some part of the fence to push off from. A dog may also dig under the fence, chew through the fence, learn to open a gate or use any combination of these methods to get out of the yard. Knowing how your dog gets out will help you to modify your yard. But until you know why your dog wants to escape, and you can decrease their motivation for doing so, the recommendations below won't be nearly as effective.

Recommendations:

For climbing/jumping dogs: Add an extension to your fence. It's not so important that the extension make the fence much higher, as long as it tilts inward at about a 45-degree angle. Be certain there are no structures placed near the fence, such as a table or chair or dog house, that your dog could use as a springboard to jump over the fence.

For digging dogs: Bury chicken wire at the base of your fence (with the sharp edges rolled inward), place large rocks at the base or lay chain-link fencing on the ground.

Never chain or otherwise tether your dog to a stationary object as a means of keeping them confined. Tethering is not only cruel, but it leads to aggressive behavior in dogs.

Training Basics

Never correct your dog after they are already left the yard. Dogs associate punishment with what they're doing at the time they're punished. Punishing your dog after the fact won't eliminate the escaping behavior, but will probably make them afraid to come to you.

Never correct your dog if the escaping is related to fear or is due to separation anxiety.

Punishing a fearful response will only make your dog more afraid, and make the problem worse. In addition, avoid inadvertently reinforcing a fearful behavior—such as petting a frightened dog and saying, "It's okay."

Only correct your dog if you can administer correction at the moment your dog is escaping, and only if they don't associate the correction with you. If you can squirt them with a hose or make a loud noise as they are going over, under or through the fence, it might be unpleasant enough that they won't want to do it again. If they realize that you made the noise or squirted the water, however, he'll simply refrain from escaping when you're around. This type of correction is difficult to administer effectively, and won't resolve the problem if used by itself.

You must also give your dog less reason to escape and make it more difficult for them to do so. Ultimately, that is how you'll put a permanent stop to the "hairy Houdini" act.

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About Napa Humane

The Humane Society of Napa County and SPCA, known as Napa Humane, is a non-profit organization incorporated in 1973. Recognizing that companion animals are an important part of healthy communities, we've grown to consider Napa Humane a community service organization. Our programs and services are designed to address the needs of animals – and also to provide support, education, and assistance for all the people who care for and about them.

Napa Humane is a private and independent organization that is supported by private donations by individuals and businesses, bequests, and fees for service. We receive no government funding, tax dollars or funding from national animal welfare organizations.

Our Mission

To promote the welfare of companion animals through protection, advocacy, education, and by example.