



Behavior Modification Medications for Dogs

Behavior modification medications are pharmaceuticals that can be prescribed for an animal who is experiencing behavior challenges, and whose training plan can benefit from some sort of pharmaceutical assistance. These medications must be prescribed by a veterinarian. This document (while not an exhaustive list) can be used as a general guide when understanding how a medication might be an appropriate avenue for an animal and what medications might be best suited to their needs.

When might behavior medications be considered?

1. **A dog displaying generalized fear/anxiety.** This is a dog that demonstrates signs of stress or anxiety regardless of environment. They may refuse to leave “safe” areas, stall out/cower in new areas, have chronically soft stools, consistently showing fearful body language, etc. They may be hypervigilant or “on guard,” quick to perceive a threat, or panic in the presence of unfamiliar stimuli. They may respond to perceived threats by freezing, fleeing, or aggressing.
2. **Obsessive-compulsive behaviors.** This is a dog who is showing repetitive motion behaviors, frequently spinning or biting/attacking their hind quarters, light and shadow chasing, fly snapping (when there aren’t any flies), or other self-injurious behaviors like creating sores by licking or chewing themselves (once any potential medical cause has been ruled out).
3. **A dog demonstrating atypical or extreme behaviors related to something unavoidable in the environment.** This is most common in cases where dogs are working on challenges such as reactive behaviors and are so fearful or frustrated around triggers that their handlers have trouble finding ANY times when they are “under threshold” (a baseline requirement for being able to change/train those behaviors). Whether they are temporary assists to a training plan or part of long-term management, these medications help dogs cope enough with their triggers to begin to make progress in training with them.
4. **A dog who is generally comfortable in their environment but must undergo a temporary stressful experience,** like fireworks, thunderstorms, or a stressful/scary veterinary examination or procedure. These are typically short-term or as needed and are recommended to have a “trial” prior to the needed administration in order to make sure the dosage is correct.
5. **Depression or learned helplessness.** While these situations are very different, they often present the same and are treated with the same medications. These dogs may be inappetent, lethargic, non-affiliative, and/or non-responsive to human attempts at interaction. These behaviors are often noted after long-term under-socialization (such as in hoarding cases), or neglect and abuse.

IMPORTANT: BEHAVIOR MEDICATIONS DO NOT “FIX” BEHAVIORS

In order to make progress with an unwanted behavior, you need to use a combination of management strategies (addressing environmental factors) and training strategies (actively teaching new behaviors). *Behavior medications on their own cannot and do not eliminate unwanted behaviors*—they simply give us a greater opportunity to make progress using training or management strategies. Most common behavior challenges can be addressed successfully without them, but the stigma surrounding medication can stop people from inquiring about them even when they might be of assistance. Wondering if medication might be a good option for your situation? *Contact our free helpline to speak with one of our certified trainers.*

What are some common medications used in behavior modification?

Trazodone: Antidepressant thought to inhibit the uptake of serotonin by nerves in the brain, thus resulting in more serotonin in the body to stimulate other nerves. Peak blood levels reached within 1 hour of oral administration. Used both for short term usage and to help with situational anxiety. Occasionally used (most often in conjunction with other medications) for chronic anxiety. Can be used as a sleep aid. Has minimal documented side effects when used at therapeutic levels. Low risk of dependency but should be weaned off if used consistently over long periods.

Gabapentin (Neurontin): Anticonvulsant originally used to treat partial seizures and nerve pain. It is also frequently used to treat anxiety disorders and used as a mild sedative. There are several case studies documenting the efficacy for these purposes but limited large scale studies. One study completed involved cats. Reaches peak levels in about 2 hours and is eliminated from the body within a few hours, depending on dose. Frequently used for OCD behaviors thought to be pain related, experimentally for anxiety (with a constantly building mountain of anecdotal evidence of efficacy), and can be used at higher doses as a sedative prior to veterinary procedures. Relatively low risk of side effects. Low potential for dependence.

Alprazolam (Xanax): A Benzodiazepine used to treat anxiety and panic disorder. Depresses activity within the central nervous system to reduce stress and panic responses. Increases dopamine and decreases adrenaline. Especially effective for sound phobias or anxiety with elements of panic (i.e., separation anxiety, escape behaviors). Should generally be used short term or situationally. Has a greater risk of developing dependency and should be weaned off gradually if used long term.

Fluoxetine (Prozac): SSRI antidepressant used to treat major depressive disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and panic disorder. Ideal for generalized anxiety, not situational. Typically takes 4 to 6 weeks to achieve full therapeutic levels. However anecdotally improvement has been detectable within 1 to 2 weeks. Often used in conjunction with trazodone or alprazolam short term while awaiting therapeutic levels. Must be tapered down carefully if cessation is desired. Generally recommended if it is assessed an animal will need lifelong pharmaceutical assistance, not just a temporary management tool for a specific behavior.

Clonidine: The action of this drug is to reduce the release of adrenaline/epinephrine in the brain. Because of this, it can often be beneficial for dogs that have arousal (over-excitement) spikes, which we often see manifest as bursts of panic, reactivity, or extreme jumpy mouthy behavior. Response in any particular animal will vary, and there is a wide dose range.

When are behavior medications inappropriate/not necessary?

When an animal shows signs of distress in a situation that is *avoidable or can be modified (trained) to a subthreshold level*, and when there are environmental factors that can be changed that will alleviate the triggers without the use of medication.

Is a training plan needed every time behavior modification medications are used?

Usually, but not always. In most cases, the combination of medication and training is the most effective plan for long term behavioral health and rapid improvement because behavior and associations are learned, and decreasing stress is not only psychologically therapeutic but also improves learning. Occasionally, however, a dog may need pharmaceutical assistance to get through a specific set of circumstances unlikely to be repeated that is also unavoidable. For example, a dog undergoing a veterinary exam for a painful injury may need medication to help with the exam. If the dog ordinarily feels comfortable with vet care and is only struggling because of the added stressor of pain, training (i.e. the act of teaching a new behavior) is not likely necessary.

What do I need to know when exploring these medications for my dog?

- **Talk to a certified behavior professional.** *Contact our free helpline or see our local training references handout.* It's possible that medication isn't necessary, but if it is, a certified behavior professional will hopefully be able to point you in the right direction.
- **Talk to a vet.** This is your starting line since these medications must be prescribed by a vet. Make sure to be able to describe the behaviors you are seeing, and, if already working with a trainer, include any information from them that might be relevant.
- **Not all vets have the same experience with behavior medications.** There is not always crossover between the behavior and veterinary fields, and many vets have never worked with trainers to prescribe medications or had the opportunity for continuing education on the topic. Because of this, it can be beneficial to inquire about a particular vet's experience or get recommendations of savvy vets in your area from local certified trainers. Many professionals who have additional experience in navigating the intersection between vet and behavior are Fear Free certified! You can search both professionals and practices here: <https://fearfreepets.com/resources/directory/>
- **Not all trainers have the same experience with behavior medications.** Similarly, the experience of certified behavior professionals also varies widely! Ideally, if a trainer does not feel they have the experience to work with a specific case, they will be able to refer you to another professional who

does. But it is important that we as guardians know what questions to ask. This is one of the ways that our free helpline can come in handy!

- **Veterinary Behaviorists: experts in both fields.** “Veterinary Behaviorist” is a very specific title. It means that someone has not only gone to vet school but has achieved board-certification in the specialty of Veterinary Behavior. Though they are few and far between (and unfortunately often expensive), their time is well worth it when facing highly atypical behaviors. You can search for Vet Behaviorists through the <http://www.dacvb.org>.
- **Don't be afraid to advocate for your dog!** Navigating behavior challenges is tricky at the best of times. But if any part of your journey, whether with a veterinary or behavior professional is making you uncomfortable, **don't be afraid to speak up, step back, or hit pause** until you can get more information from reputable sources about what you're experiencing!
- Additional resources where you can explore this topic:
 - [Fear Free](#)
 - [VCA Hospitals](#)
 - [petMD.com](#)

A Note on CBD

Currently, there isn't enough research on the use of CBD (cannabidiol) in dogs to determine if it's safe for them. There is currently very little regulation which governs purity and concentration in most CBD products. It's extremely important to talk to your dog's veterinarian before giving your dog a CBD product. If your vet recommends CBD, they will be able to provide *a recommended, appropriate dose range* for your dog, as well as potential side-effects or medication interactions to watch for.

East Bay SPCA Veterinary Services

The vets at our full service clinic in Oakland often work closely with our behavior team, and have a thorough background on prescribing behavior medications. Many clients who pursue private training through our organization also work with our veterinarians to find the right medications to best support their individual training plan. To check pricing, availability, or to make an appointment, you can call (510) 569-1606.