

Medications for Behavior Problems
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Recently, medications for companion animal behavior problems have been in the news. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved two drugs for behavior problems with dogs. One has been approved for treating separation anxiety problems while a second has been approved for a form of senile dementia called canine cognitive dysfunction. In clinical trials, both drugs were shown to be useful tools in helping pets with these kinds of behavior problems.

Unfortunately, the recent news has led to some confusion about what drugs can and cannot do to treat behavioral problems. Very frequently we hear clients ask: “Can’t my veterinarian just give my dog some ‘puppy Prozac’ to fix this?” The short answer is usually no.

Before determining if medication is appropriate, a veterinarian or a behavior specialist should arrive at a behavioral diagnosis as to the reason for the pet’s behavior. For example, separation anxiety is only one reason why dogs are destructive when left alone. If the destructive behavior is due to some other motivation, medication may not be helpful or appropriate. Second, in clinical testing, the medication was used in conjunction with behavioral therapy not as a substitute for it. For separation anxiety problems, a pill should not be viewed as a short-cut or a long-term cure. Many veterinarians may want to run some laboratory tests, in addition to examining the pet, to be sure that the animal is in good health prior to prescribing any medication for a behavior problem.

Veterinarians and veterinary behaviorists have been prescribing a variety of medications for behavior problems for well over 20 years. With the exception of the two drugs mentioned above, these have been extra-label use, meaning they have not received FDA approval for behavioral problems. Although these drugs have not been through the rigorous testing required for approval, several of these medications have proven to be helpful in treating problems such as separation anxiety, fears and phobias, and urine marking in cats.

Unfortunately, no drug discovered thus far has proven to be the “quick fix” sought by most owners. Behavior is complex and most behavior problems have multiple influences and causes. Because of this, resolving behavior problems is also complex. Often, changes to the environment, behavior modification and drug therapy are all required to resolve the problem. If you have a behavior problem with your pet, seek help from your veterinarian and a behavior specialist, but don’t expect wonder drugs or quick fixes.