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Canine Separation Anxiety: What's Your Role?

Separation anxiety is a frustrating problem that can significantly impact a pet's overall health and well-being. Untreated chronic anxiety (eg, separation anxiety) has been associated with greater sensitivity to other anxiety triggers, immune system issues, measurable echocardiographic alterations, and possible development of stress-related diseases.¹⁻⁴

Successful management requires a multimodal approach that includes pharmaceutical intervention and behavior modification, and every member of the veterinary team plays a role. A coordinated, team-based approach can provide clients with the guidance and resources needed to effectively manage their dog's anxiety and achieve meaningful relief.

What Is Separation Anxiety?

- Separation anxiety is rooted in maladaptive, physiological responses to environmental stimuli, with an estimated 17% of dogs affected.⁵ Some dogs may have an inherited predisposition to separation anxiety; dogs can also develop it, depending on their history.
- Signs, which may be seen before and during separation, may include distress, vocalization (eg, barking, whining), drooling, destroying household items, house soiling, and attempting to escape the crate or home.
- As compared with unaffected dogs, dogs with separation anxiety require longer periods of time to normalize when their owner returns.
- A definitive diagnosis requires a medical and behavioral evaluation by a veterinarian. Videos of the pet when left alone can provide important insights to aid in diagnosis.

Management of Separation Anxiety

Management typically involves a combination of behavior modification and medication.

What Is the Role of Medication?

Dogs experiencing separation anxiety have a highly active limbic system (ie, the emotional brain) that overrides the cortical system (ie, the logical brain), which impedes their ability to learn coping behaviors.² Anxiety medications act on key physiological pathways to reduce the dog's baseline anxiety, making it easier for them to focus, process information, and benefit from behavior modification.⁶⁻⁸ Reconcile® (fluoxetine hydrochloride) is a once-daily chewable tablet that is FDA-approved for the treatment of canine separation anxiety when combined with behavior modification. It works by temporarily increasing levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin, which mediates anxiety, in the brain.⁸

What Is the Role of Behavior Modification?

Behavior modification focuses on reducing anxiety around owner absences and reinforcing

calm, independent behaviors. The BOND® Training Program is a tool to help owners train their dogs through simple, easy-to-understand steps⁷:

- **Be positive:** Reward positive behaviors and avoid reprimanding unwanted behavior.
- **Only reward calm behavior:** Ignore attention-seeking behavior.
- **No more drama when you come and go:** Remain calm when coming and going from the home, and consider a distraction (eg, toy, treat) for the pet before leaving.
- **Develop your dog's independence:** Teach the dog to be calm and relaxed in a “safe place” in the house.

Ongoing follow-up over the first several weeks of implementation is essential to evaluating response and ensuring success.

Every Team Member Has a Role

Every member of the veterinary team has a role to play in supporting dogs with separation anxiety.

- **Client Service Representative**
 - Recognize signs of canine separation anxiety during client conversations, providing a source of empathy and hope.
 - Schedule veterinarian consultations for pets with suspected separation anxiety.
 - Work with clients to overcome barriers to treatment (eg, financial, logistical).
- **Kennel Technician/Veterinary Assistant**
 - Recognize signs of separation anxiety in client conversations and boarding/hospitalized pets.
 - Alert a veterinarian when separation anxiety is suspected so they can discuss this issue further with the client.
- **Veterinary Technician**
 - Ask clients about new/ongoing behavior concerns at every wellness visit, and relay concerns to the veterinarian.
 - Recognize signs of canine separation anxiety, including through the use of questionnaires.
 - Present diagnostic plans created by the veterinarian, ruling out medical conditions that may be mistaken for separation anxiety.
 - Present veterinarian-created treatment plans.
 - Teach clients to implement successful behavior modification such as with the BOND® Training Program.
 - Schedule follow-up calls and/or recheck visits as recommended by the veterinarian.
- **Veterinarian**
 - Screen for separation anxiety and other behavioral concerns at every wellness visit.

- Recommend diagnostics (when indicated) to rule out medical conditions that may be mistaken for separation anxiety.
- Provide a clear diagnosis of separation anxiety while offering empathy and reassurance.
- Explain how a medication such as Reconcile works with behavior modification such as the BOND® Training Program to help their dogs cope with their separation anxiety.
- Set realistic client expectations, including sharing that improvement may take several months and pets may experience setbacks that require retraining.
- Recommend follow-up phone calls or recheck visits to assess patient progress.
- Refer patients to a board-certified behaviorist if they are not improving with intervention.

Conclusion

Separation anxiety is a complex but highly manageable condition. When left untreated, it can lead to impactful long-term health consequences for the pet and strain the human–animal bond. Combining behavior modification strategies with appropriate medication offers the strongest opportunity for improvement. Clear communication, realistic expectation-setting, and consistent follow-up by the veterinary healthcare team are essential components of care. By working together, the veterinary team can help identify at-risk patients, guide clients through diagnosis and treatment, and provide the sustained support needed to achieve long-term success.

IMPORTANT SAFETY INFORMATION

For Reconcile® (fluoxetine hydrochloride), the most common adverse events reported in decreasing order of reported frequency are: decreased appetite, depression/lethargy, shaking/shivering/tremor, vomiting, restlessness and anxiety, seizures, aggression, diarrhea, mydriasis, vocalization, weight loss, panting, confusion, incoordination, and hypersalivation. Reconcile chewable tablets are contraindicated for dogs with a history of seizures or when used with MAOIs. See full product label for more information.

For references, please see
[cliniciansbrief.com/article/canine-separation-anxiety-whats-your-role](https://www.cliniciansbrief.com/article/canine-separation-anxiety-whats-your-role)