



## Associazione Veterinari Esperti in Comportamento

Preparations containing **acepromazine** are commonly used by general veterinary practitioners to treat the acute phase of fear/phobia related problems in dogs, even though this is not a licensed indication for these products. However, its use does not improve the patient's state, and could instead lead to a worsening of welfare during traumatic events.

The pharmacological treatment of phobic patients should alleviate the discomfort and related symptoms during the event perceived by the dog as threatening, and support a program of long-term behavioural modification.

Preparations based on acepromazine do not fulfill these requirements, and so **AVEC (Association of Veterinarians Experts in Behaviour) advises against the use of such products as a treatment for dogs displaying noise fear or phobia**, based on scientific evidence from various authors.

Phobia can be defined as an irrational fear that is disproportionate to the actual threat. It is an exaggerated, sudden, intense and ungraded response that may be expressed in a strong impulse to avoid and flee (Overall, 2013).

The behaviours displayed by a noise phobic animal are similar to those associated with intense fear, but with an exaggerated intensity compared to the intensity of the stimulus. Signs include; trembling, mydriasis, tachypnoea, tachycardia, ptialism, hyperkinesis with attempts to escape or hide, urination and/or defecation, destructiveness, and sometimes aggression.

Acepromazine is traditionally used to block the expression of fear in the presence of fearful stimuli, such as loud noises. However, acepromazine's main mode of action is blockade of dopaminergic receptors in the basal ganglia and in the limbic system, leading to CNS depression, sedation and motor incoordination. Acepromazine increases a dog's sensitivity to noises but impairs its ability to process information, comprehend and respond to events and stimuli (Overall, 2013). **The result is a dog that is sedated and immobilised, but still able to perceive and experience fear of the threatening stimulus without being able to escape from it.** Dogs that are already fearful of noises can therefore experience profound stress and can become further sensitized (Clough, 1982).

A further possible complication of phenothiazine drugs is paroxysmal arousal and disinhibition of aggression that can make dogs dangerous even for their owners (Crowell-Davis & Murray, 2006). For these reasons, AVEC advises against the use of acepromazine, especially as sole treatment or preventative for animals with a noise fear. AVEC also advises against all methods based on physical punishment and flooding (i.e. forcing dogs to remain in the presence of the fearful stimuli). Safer and more effective drugs are available, which can be combined with behavioural therapy and preventative management.

AVEC's recommendation against the use of acepromazine as drug for the treatment of fearful or phobic dogs is consistent with recommendations from veterinary behaviourists in other countries (e.g. Spain: see AVEPA-GRETCA).

### References

- AVEPA-GRETCA:  
[http://www.avepa.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=325:recomendaciones-del-gretca-sobre-el-uso-de-la-acepromacina-en-problemas-de-fobias-en-perros&catid=3:newsflash](http://www.avepa.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=325:recomendaciones-del-gretca-sobre-el-uso-de-la-acepromacina-en-problemas-de-fobias-en-perros&catid=3:newsflash)
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