



Training Horses to Voluntarily Take Oral Medications Via a Syringe

Feeling comfortable taking medications delivered via oral dosing syringe is an essential life skill for all horses. The following guide offers a training plan for teaching both voluntary taking of treats and eventual medication delivered in a dosing syringe.

1. Select tasty treats

- Seek out a soft, semi-liquid treat your horse loves, to eventually be dispensed through a dosing syringe.

Examples of soft treats include:

- No-sugar-added applesauce
- Sweetened syrups (e.g. water mixed with Stevia, honey, molasses, maple syrup, peppermint extract)
- Corn syrup (e.g. Karo)
- Blended/pulverized horse friendly fruit and veggies.

2. Select area to train

- Ideally train (and eventually dose) in an area that's quiet, with minimal distractions.
- Select a location that minimizes flight space while still offering some free movement (e.g. stall, and tie-out or cross ties with slight slack).
- If the horse is especially bonded to other horses, consider having a calm equine friend tied or stalled nearby.

3. Build the horse's taste for the treat

- Initially serve the soft food mixed with an already-preferred food placed in a familiar feeder, like a pan or bucket (e.g. small portion of applesauce or plain pumpkin mixed with grain or alfalfa pellets placed in bucket).
- Offer the food, then walk away; letting the horse investigate and eat without added pressure.
- Once the horse starts eagerly eating the mixture containing the new soft food, slowly increase the ratio of soft food until eventually eaten on its own.

4. Hold the syringe in hand

Hold the syringe initially in the hand farthest from the horse. Present the syringe low and slow, initially holding away from the horse. Reward any interest, such as looking over at the syringe, or reinforce for remaining relaxed in a stationary position. Eventually move the syringe into the other hand and hold increasingly closer to the horse at varied angles to ensure he's relaxed with the sight of the syringe presented in different ways.

5. Practice Handling

Stand on the horse's left side, where most horses are most at ease being handled from. Or, for horses with previous negative experiences with being medicated, consider restarting from their right side. Integrate halter and lead into practice sessions to increase ease of handling during eventual dosing.

- Facing in the same direction as the horse, stand in front of their withers and off to their side just enough to avoid being caught underfoot if the horse strikes or rears. Initiate touch using the hand closest to the horse.
- Begin handling in an area the horse is more comfortable being touched, such as their shoulders or lower neck. Then, with a gentle, sustained touch that may mimic grooming or petting, move the hand up the neck or mane toward the horse's face. At the jawline, wrap the closest hand to the horse just beneath the head, sliding it around the horse's face to gently hold and support the opposite side, as this will gently stabilize the head for both mock and actual medication dosing.
- If the horse remains relaxed as their nose and head are supported, next use the hand farthest from the horse to mimic a mouth touch that will occur with the syringe. For instance, gently touch the side of the mouth just behind the lips, then reinforce with a treat. Then gently maneuver the fingers to touch the corner of the mouth, slightly lifting the lip, and touching a finger just inside the cheek, then treat. When working inside the horse's mouth, use caution. Aim for the large gap between the canine teeth and wolf teeth, as it reduces the risk of being bitten AND

it is where you would eventually deliver oral medication with a syringe. It is similar to placing a bit for riding.

6. Retrace steps

Once comfortable, retrace each of the previous mouth handling steps, this time incorporating an empty syringe.

7. Dispense treats via syringe

Start with applying a small amount of the soft treat on the outside of the syringe and if the horse remains comfortable, work up to squeezing the treat directly into the horse's mouth from the syringe. With each success, the horse's cooperation should be reinforced with either another reward, like an additional preloaded treat syringe, or handful of grain.

8. Incorporate odd taste

Build up the horse's tolerance and resiliency after tasting the occasional odd-tasting syringe, as will eventually occur with medications. Always have the odd-tasting mixture sandwiched in before and behind with a treat-only syringe to both increase eager syringe taking and to reinforce their accepting a less-than-appetizing syringe. Mock medication syringes might include water only, or different mix-ins to create a slightly sour or bitter taste, such as water mixed with lemon.

9. Have a lineup ready

Have a lineup of preloaded treat-filled syringes ready to go, such as three to five syringes, offering one after another to build a rapid syringe-taking routine. Getting horses into the flow of taking treats from multiple syringes offered in rapid succession increases eagerness to take each syringe and reinforces acceptance of any less-than-tasty syringe that's occasionally sandwiched in between.

- End each session with a happy activity, such as freedom to graze on lead, petting and praise, or mealtime.

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