

Giving Your Horse Oral Medications



Top Dressing

(Placing powdered medication in grain)

- The simplest medication delivery strategy is top-dressing, or placing powdered medication on top of a horse's normal grain ration. Lower starch alternatives may also be used, including alfalfa pellets, lower sugar feed or sugar-free applesauce.
- Before crushing pills, ensure your horse's vet has first 'okayed' the process, as pulverizing pills into powder form may impact intended effect and safety.
- To help medication 'stick' to the grain rather than sinking to the bottom of the bucket where it's discarded, a palatable wet dressing can be added to the mixture to bond medication to the feed and boost palatability.
 - Dressing options to add to bucketed feed include applesauce, oil and sweetened syrup, (e.g. simple syrup, maple syrup or molasses).
 - Alternative lower sugar dressing options include a small amount of corn, vegetable, or rice bran oil, no sugar added applesauce or water sweetened with stevia.
- If medication requires manual crushing, ensure it's done safely without direct open air exposure. For instance, don't crush in a coffee grinder as it exposes particles to open air that's breathed by human lungs. Instead, use a contained method, such as crushing within sealed pouches that minimize air exposure and also allow for portioned amounts.

Hiding Medications Inside of Treats

- Hiding medications in treats works well for treat-loving horses who need only a minimal amount of medication.
- Choose a high-value sweet treat the horse is likely to enjoy.
- Ideally the treat is slightly malleable to shape a tasty treat surrounding the medication. Or, alternatively, the treat is strong enough to allow for a hole or pocketed slit to be made for the medication to slide into, holding it in place as the treat is taken.
- Commercial treats may be used for such purpose as may fresh treat options, such as pressing a pill into a banana or hollowing out a spot in a piece of carrot or apple to cradle the pill as the horse eats.

Photo by Barbara Olsen from Pexels

Teach Treat Taking

- Before delivering a medicated treat, first practice a smooth flow for easy taking of multiple treats delivered by hand one after another in fast succession. Getting the flow down first will assist in more eager treat taking and easier acceptance of medications when medicated treats are eventually added into that treat flow.
 - ~ To build the horse's desire to participate, turn treat taking into a routine or habit, with a precursor he'll recognize, like shaking the treat bag or saying, "do you want a cookie?!" before he's fed.
 - ~ If a novel treat will be incorporated into the treating process, start by familiarizing the horse to this new taste and texture by first feeding out of the horse's regular bucket or other feeder. The new treat may initially be presented in small pieces alongside a more familiar feed, such as grain or alfalfa pellets, to increase receptiveness, before it's eventually presented on its own. Doing so offers a lower stress way for the horse to evaluate the deliciousness of the treat on his own time and increases the likelihood he'll develop a taste for the treat that can eventually be fed on its own in the feeder and eventually by hand.
 - ~ Once the treats that will be used for hiding medication are readily eaten in rapid succession, it's time to add a medicated treat into the delivery sequence.
 - ~ Start by feeding one or two small bites of the yummy treat, then after he swallows, feed the treat that contains the pill, and then quickly feed 4-6 small pieces of treat afterwards. This technique minimizes his chances of recognizing the taste of the medication, and even if he does, it conditions eager expectation of treats that follow and rewards his efforts.

