

Administering Medication

Tips on administering medication to your horse.

By Sue Weaver

You're watching your vet head down your driveway. He's examined and diagnosed your horse—now it's up to you. You're clutching a large plastic bottle filled with pills that need to be administered twice a day. Unscrewing the cap, you shake some pills into your hand—they're enormous! How will you get them into your horse?

Fortunately, there are many ways to help the medicine go down. Here are some resourceful techniques, but before you try these or any other methods, always ask your vet if the pills can be crushed, or dissolved in a small amount of water, or if they must be administered whole. Don't assume you can grind or dissolve your horse's meds and add them to his feed; time-release pills sometimes have to be delivered to his digestive system intact. Find out before you proceed.

If powdering the pills or dissolving them is acceptable, ask if there are safety factors you should know about. Some horse medications can be toxic to humans when inhaled or absorbed through bare skin, especially over prolonged periods of time. It's always wise to wear latex gloves while processing medication, but your vet may suggest more stringent measures depending on the potential toxicity of the medication involved.

Grind It Up

If your vet prescribed a powder medication, or you're grinding up pills, you will want to mix it with feed or dose it from a syringe.

To efficiently reduce horse pills to granules or powder, use a mortar and pestle (available at kitchen supply or import shops and from food co-ops selling herbs) or a small electric coffee grinder. Whichever you choose, reserve your pill powdering apparatus for veterinary use only. Clean it by scrubbing it in hot, soapy water.

To break up large, hard pills before grinding, tuck them in a small paper envelope, stick that inside a plastic sandwich bag and whack the pills with a hammer. Powder only enough pills for a single dose and process them just before dosing.

Feeding Powdered Pills

Make Your Own Balling Gun

A few years ago when we were faced with the sad task of dosing our laminitis-stricken mare with daily bute, our vet showed us how to make and use this homemade PVC pipe balling gun. Its components can be purchased at any hardware store. Here's how the tool is constructed:

Materials

One 12" piece of 3/4" inner dimension PVC pipe

One 3/4" wooden dowel rod

One 1" washer with a 1/8" hole

One 1" long #6 screw

Use coarse sandpaper or a file to smooth both ends of the PVC pipe. Insert the #6 screw through the washer and screw it into the end of the dowel rod. Drop the rod inside of the PVC pipe. That's it!

To keep the rod from falling out, hold onto the dowel rod and PVC pipe simultaneously, and proceed as recommended under "Shoot it Down."

Anyone who's medicated horses knows how frustratingly fussy some are about accepting doctored feed. Still, yours can probably be conned into doing it. The trick lies in discovering a carrier food he likes. Try blending his powdered medication with mashed, cooked carrots or with applesauce and stir the mix into his grain. He has a sweet tooth? Add powdered pills to crushed after-dinner mints, pancake or corn syrup, molasses (or molasses whipped with brown sugar) or honey. Powdered fruit-flavored Kool-Aid that's premixed with sugar tempts many horses. So does yogurt in fruity flavors. And many horses adore peanut butter.

Does your horse greedily chomp hand-fed treats? Quarter an apple and set three of the quarters aside. Cut a deep slash in the fourth quarter, pack it with the crushed or powdered pill and press the edges shut. Feed your horse two of the plain

quarters, then slip him the doctored piece, rapidly chased by the third unadulterated quarter. It works nearly every time.

If you feed your horse sweet goodies, try this messy but effective trick: Stir powdered medication into a glop of canned cake frosting and let him lick it off of a flat surface, like a portable cutting board. It's safer than hand feeding.

Medicated carriers blend well with sweet feed, and the sweetness helps mask bitter flavors, as does alfalfa molasses. Unless you're positive your horse will accept doctored feed, only add a dollop of medication/carrier mixture to just a moderate amount of feed—don't overwhelm him. Be sure to thoroughly blend whatever you use into the feed, rather than drizzling it on top. After your horse cleans up the spiked feed, you can give him the rest of his ration. Allow him three hours to consume medication-laced feed. Then, if a significant amount remains, remove it and try a different carrier. If you're not certain whether his medicated feed is being consumed or scattered, consider feeding it from a nosebag.

Syringe Dosing

Hot Tip!

If your horse resists paste deworming but you want to syringe dose medication, rehearse using tasty, unadulterated carrier. You'll perfect your technique and he might just decide being dosed tastes pretty darned good.

If your horse rejects medicated feed, try dosing ground pills or powdered medication through a syringe. To do so, blend the powder into no more than two ounces of runny, goopy carrier. Good ones include finely pureed baby foods like carrots or applesauce, fat-free yogurt (it's stickier than the low-fat kind; smooth vanilla, lemon or coffee flavors work well), sugary syrups or molasses, or smooth peanut butter liberally thinned with vegetable oil.

Load the spiked carrier into a catheter-tip irrigation syringe (get it from your vet or local tack and feed store) or an empty large-volume, single-dose paste deworming tube you've scrubbed in steaming, sudsy water and rinsed thoroughly. Administer the dose as though you were paste deworming your horse, taking care to squirt all medication well back on his tongue. As soon as you've emptied the syringe, grasp your horse's jaw and elevate his head. Hold it up until he swallows.

Dosing By Hand

If your horse is willing, you can give an intact pill by hand when necessary. However, if your horse is on medication for the long term, he may eventually begin to refuse this method. To dose a horse by hand, stand alongside him, facing him. Insert your fingers into the bars of his mouth. When he opens his mouth, reach in and grasp a fistful of tongue.

Hold tight. Coax the tongue down and out the side of his mouth. His mouth will gape open. Place the pill as far back on his tongue as you can, taking care not to snag yourself on his teeth. Now quickly release the tongue. This will carry the pill to the back of his throat where he'll gulp it down.

Shoot It Down

Not crazy about sticking your arm inside a horse's mouth? Neither was the soul who invented the balling gun. This plunger-fitted tubular implement is often used to propel pills down large animals' throats, particularly cattle. Ready-made metal or plastic balling guns can be purchased from veterinary supply catalogs, but you can easily make your own (see "Make Your Own Balling Gun" pg. 95). To use any of these tools, draw back the plunger and insert a pill in its open end. Hold it so the pill doesn't slide out. Elevate your horse's head and with or without extracting his tongue, insert the implement into his mouth up to the base of the tongue and zap the pill down his throat. (Never insert a balling gun farther than the base of your horse's tongue. Ramming it into his throat can cause serious, permanent damage. And never administer large, whole pills or halved pills to Minis or foals.)

It may take some trial and error to find the best method of getting the medicine to go down, but with a little creativity—it can be done.

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