

Desensitization of the Needle-Shy Horse

We want every vet visit to be a pleasant experience for your horse, but some horses are resistant or fearful of needles. Needle-shy horses may become increasingly agitated and even dangerous. There is not enough time during a single vet visit to solve this problem, so you will have some homework to do!

Equipment Needed:

- A lead shank +/- nose chain
- Grain or treats: a little bit of grain in the bottom of a bucket or small treats will be more effective than generous amounts, which decrease the reward value.
- Safe work area such as a large enclosure with good footing and headroom
- Ask your veterinarian for a syringe with a cap, but no needle, to practice with.

Step 1: Teach an alternative behavior.

- Whenever your horse reacts, it helps to have a strongly reinforced "good behavior" you can depend on to get his focus back on you.
- Teach your horse to put his head down in response to pressure by first applying pressure in a downward direction on the lead rope. The moment your horse drops his head, even slightly, release the pressure immediately, say "good boy/girl" and/or give a treat.
- Repeat and reinforce daily until it becomes a strong, reliable response and treats are no longer needed.

Step 2: Desensitization

- Anticipation is often much worse than the actual event. Focus on calming, soothing words and approach the horse with both kindness and firmness so that he learns to respect you.
- Begin by approaching your horse and gently pinch the skin on his neck. If he stands quietly, say "good boy/girl" or reward with a treat, and repeat.
- If your horse reacts, calmly "ride it out" rather than stopping the pinch. This will allow the horse to learn that movement or resistance is not effective in stopping the procedure. Ask him to put his head down and try again.
- Repeat this process over and over again until he'll let you pinch his neck without making a move. Gradually increase the intensity of your pinches until he'll stand quietly for a good, firm pinch.
- Then, add in the syringe. Pinch the neck and gently poke the horse with the tip of the needle-less syringe next to the pinched skin. Repeat until your horse is calm throughout the whole process.