

Desensitization to Oral Medication Administration

Some horses are resistant to being dewormed or having other oral medications administered. However, with time and patience, they can be desensitized to these procedures.

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
- An empty dewormer tube or oral syringe
- Honey, molasses, or applesauce
 - Honey or molasses should not be used for horses that are overweight or have metabolic issues. Use unsweetened applesauce instead.

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 rubbing the empty dewormer tube all over your horse's shoulders, neck, and head. Start at the shoulders and gradually move towards the head, eventually getting to the mouth. 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. 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.
- Then, fill the syringe with honey, molasses, or applesauce and also put some on the outside of the syringe. Allow your horse to lick the syringe. Gradually progress to squirting some in his mouth just like you would with deworming medication. Repeat until your horse is calm throughout the whole process.