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How to Perform Equine Veterinary Treatments Without Drama

Horse owners need not have extensive veterinary knowledge or skills, however it is important for them to be able to perform basic treatments to their horse without drama. While some horses may present a challenge in learning to accept veterinary treatments, ultimately all horses should accept all but very painful treatments in a calm and controlled manner. They should generally accept these treatments with minimal restraint and no sedation.

In this article, I discuss some of the “boring basics” of treating horses, however my priority is to emphasize that veterinary treatments need not damage the relationship between horse and handler. Instead treatments should be looked upon as one more opportunity to strengthen that bond.

Among the most common treatments that owners are required to perform on their horses are oral medication, ophthalmic (eye) treatments, wound treatments, bandaging, and intramuscular injections. While performing these treatments is not difficult, some veterinary knowledge, good technique, and good horsemanship are all required to perform them easily and well.

BASIC GUIDELINES

- All treatment protocols should be supervised by a veterinarian or knowledgeable technician.
- Be sure that you understand the instructions given for a particular medication or treatment. This includes understanding the underlying rationale for its use.
- You should know the route of administration and be clear on the schedule of administration.
- Be sure to maintain and handle medications correctly and according to instructions. Many medications require refrigeration or should at least be kept at room temperature, *i.e.* not stored in an un-insulated tack room during winter. Check expiration dates on medications that have been in your possession for a while.
- Your veterinarian should make all of this very clear to you in his or her treatment

instructions. If you have any questions you should be sure to ask before you proceed.

- If the treatments you are performing are not being supervised by a veterinarian, you should have a high degree of confidence that the treatments are correct and appropriate.
- If you cannot perform the treatments on your own, ask for help.

IMPORTANT PRECAUTIONS

Anyone administering treatments to horses should know about some of the common pitfalls. There is no limit to the number of things that can go wrong when working with horses, and this is especially true when performing veterinary treatments. The following list is far from complete, but mentions a few of the common problems:

- Physical injury to horse or handler can occur. Your physical safety while performing the treatment is always the most important concern, followed by the safety of the horse. If you ever feel that you or the horse is in danger, you should stop and ask for help from someone with experience.
- Inappropriate use of medications can result in the death of a horse. For example, penicillin is a very useful antibiotic in horses. It is commonly used to treat respiratory infections. The most common formulation is given by the intramuscular route. It is very important that good injection technique be used. If the drug is injected into a vessel accidentally, a serious reaction can result. Horses having this reaction become very excitable and may even fall or have seizures. This reaction should not be confused with an allergic reaction. It is actually caused by a carrier of the penicillin (procaine), which causes excitation to the brain when it gets into the blood too quickly.
- Antibiotics given indiscriminately and inappropriately can result in severe intestinal disturbance, colic, diarrhea or even death. Only give antibiotics under the supervision of your veterinarian.
- Overuse or incorrect use of anti-inflammatory medication in horses can cause fatal ulceration of the intestinal tract, organ damage and death. *See my article "Bute & Banamine®: What Horse Owner's Should Know."*
- While it is commonly given by the oral route, phenylbutazone is a commonly administered intravenous injection in veterinary practice. This is only given by the intravenous route, never in the muscle. Phenylbutazone should never be injected by anyone other than veterinarians and veterinary technicians. Even a small amount of bute injection that escapes out of the vein into the tissues causes severe tissue irritation and destruction. This can lead to the skin and deeper tissue actually sloughing off.

- Incorrect injection technique can lead to local infection and many other problems. I personally do not believe in teaching or encouraging my clients to give an intravenous injection. It is a skill that is difficult to master unless it is done frequently. Nevertheless, I do encourage my clients to learn how to give a proper intramuscular injection. *See my client handout: "Intramuscular Injections" for more information on proper technique.*
- No class of drug is safe when given inappropriately.
- Poor bandaging technique can result in severe injury to important structures of the limb, and may even encourage the development of proud flesh. If you aren't sure of how to bandage, you should not do it unsupervised.
- Incorrect technique in applying eye treatments, or inappropriate use of eye medications can result in injury to the eye.
- Treatment of wounds with inappropriate topical medications can actually delay healing.

BEHAVIORAL APPROACH

You should think of giving veterinary treatments as an opportunity to train your horse and to improve the communication between horse and handler. If you can easily medicate your horse, think of all the more pleasurable things you can convince him or her to do easily. If you can give a horse sour tasting oral medications or intramuscular injection easily and without stress, you can likely teach him or her to do many other things. If you can keep up the trust for 2 weeks of eye treatments, you are likely to be able to convince him or her that crossing a bridge or water or loading in the trailer is easy too.

There is a perception that administering veterinary treatments to a horse should make him or her trust us less. When treatments are administered using common sense, good horsemanship and the right technique, the opposite should be true. The techniques I recommend for administering any veterinary treatment are based on firm but gentle, good horsemanship. A great horseman once said: "Make the right thing easy and the wrong thing difficult." This applies as well to teaching horses to accept veterinary treatment as it does to anything else we train a horse to do.

A few important guidelines:

1. Most treatments performed correctly are not very painful to the horse and should not cause aversion. If a horse recoils in pain or react violently when a treatment is being given, it is likely that the treatment is not being performed using the best possible technique.
2. Treatments performed using proper technique look easy and painless. I tell my veterinary staff that any simple treatment should be performed within two

minutes of entering any horse's stall. If not, they need to stop and ask themselves what they are doing that is not working. If they cannot answer this and see great progress within each 30 seconds, they need to stop and ask for help.

3. The first aspect of this system of training horses to accept medications is to use the best veterinary technique to inflict as little pain as possible.
4. With each correctly performed treatment, a horse should become easier, not harder to treat. If this is not the case, the person treating must look inward for the cause, not blame the horse.
5. The approach to treating individual horses differs with breed, personality, and especially handling history. In my opinion, all horses which can be touched with a hand can take simple veterinary treatments without sedation or heavy restraint. Success just takes correct technique and horsemanship and variable amounts of time and patience.
6. Before a horse can be expected to tolerate a veterinary treatment, there must be some communication and trust between horse and handler. If oral medications need to be given to a yearling colt that has never been handled, the colt must be taught first to yield to pressure in a halter. Before a nail puncture on the sole of a foot can be treated, a horse must learn to yield the foot to a handler and stand comfortably. To try to perform the treatment without establishing the foundational steps will result in failure.
7. Getting a horse to accept a treatment involves consistent application of pressure upon resistance, and release upon a "yield" or "try." As you are working with your horse, you are constantly communicating with him using these cues - whether or not you know it. For example, as you put your finger in his mouth in preparation for oral medication, he pulls back. You respond instantly with pressure on his halter. As he yields to this pressure, you immediately release. This approach applies to all types of treatments and training.
8. Never start with pressure. Always allow a horse to accept a treatment without anticipating resistance by trying to "hold him in place." Remember that we cannot hold a horse in place anyway, so why try?
9. How easy you make delivering the treatment look relates to timing and consistency of the correct cues.
10. Think of achieving the delivery of the medication or the treatment as the final step in a series of steps leading up to it. Train each foundational step first. For example, before squirting dewormer in a horse's mouth, he must first accept the syringe. Before that he should accept a finger.
11. As with other training, you should always end on a positive note.

12. Performing veterinary treatments on foals is different, but not necessarily more difficult than treating adults. The techniques of restraint and the cues used are somewhat different.

CONCLUSION

Horse owners should be able to perform basic veterinary treatments on their horses without stress. Performing these treatments requires some veterinary knowledge, and requires good horsemanship. All treatment protocols should be supervised by a veterinarian who has seen the horse and made a proper diagnosis.

I personally enjoy the challenge of teaching horses to accept veterinary treatments in a calm and trusting way. I see it as an extension of my horsemanship skills, which I continue to work on with each horse that I see in my veterinary practice.

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