



Administering Medication: Dogs

For any pet parent who has tried and failed to administer medication, you know how frustrating it can be! A dog who will literally eat trash suddenly turns into a gourmet food critic when it comes to hiding meds. Fortunately, our shelter has an arsenal of tips and tricks which can help improve the process!

Oral Medication

There are many reasons why a dog might spit out a pill, or refuse liquid medication. Often taste is a factor, but it also matters *how meds have been administered in the past*. If certain patterns predict yucky tastes, that are perhaps then followed by invasive handling (ex. forceful pilling) they will be immediately suspicious by the time you get the pill bottle out of the cabinet, let alone offer it to them.

Here are some ways that you can help set your dog up for success when administering oral meds:

- **Context is key.** If you have a dog who knows the medication routine, it's time to change it up. Dogs are masters of context cues! *Plan to prep pills ahead of time*, and stage them in areas that you haven't attempted to medicate your dog before, perhaps places with more pleasant associations. Examples might be offering pills straight from a treat pouch or treat jar, offer them while out on a walk, or even theatrically "accidentally" dropping them in places they usually expect to have to hoover up scraps, such as the kitchen, or the table during dinner. Then you can combine ideas from the subsequent bullet points:
- **Account for taste.** Many pills are uncoated, chalky, bitter, or otherwise yucky. We love pill capsules for this. You can buy clear empty capsules, and break pills in half to fit them inside. Even when dissected around, these capsules don't let the gross taste get out. And you can fill them with something tasty (such as spray cheese) *to practice out of context*. If most times a pill capsule contains tasty cheese, they will be less likely to be suspicious the few times it *also* contains a pill.
- **Account for texture.** Many of our dogs have learned to dissect suspicious treats till they can be sure nothing gross waits within. You can counter this by doing things like *hiding kibbles in pill pockets and using them as treats*. When your dog dissects them, they'll find only tasty food. Once they are no longer dissecting each one, you can begin to change the kibbles for pills. You can also *hide a coated pill capsule directly in a bowl of food*, if your dog is used to hoovering down their dinner. Pay attention to detail! Meds are expensive, and a few extra seconds to make sure the entire pill is completely covered can make all the difference.

- **Use a “treat train.”** Many dogs enjoy catching multiple treats, one after another. Often in shelter we will make 4-6 “dummy treats” with one “pill treat.” We will toss treat after treat, and slip the pill treat into the middle of the “train.” Especially when done out of context, this can be an effective and sneaky method!
- **Choose the right garnish.** Offering something extra tasty with the pill can make all the difference! Here are some of our shelter favorites:
 - Vienna sausage
 - Spray cheese
 - DIY pill pockets (many recipes on the internet)
 - Wild Weenies treats (good shape for hollowing and hiding pills inside)
 - Peanut butter
 - Cream cheese

Ear/Eye Medication

Ear and eye meds can be quite tricky, especially if administering them is uncomfortable. While there will be some individual needs not covered here, there are some universal things you can work on to help your dog cope with the process:

- **Practice out of context.** Aka, miming through administering medication at times when it is not necessary for your animal to receive them. And crucially, miming through PARTS of administering the medication, while offering treats or something your dog loves. If your dog shows discomfort with being reached for, tilting their muzzle upwards, and you putting in eyedrops, try breaking it down. An example might look like:
 - Reach for your dog—stop and offer them a treat
 - Reach and tilt their muzzle—stop and offer a treat
 - Reach and tilt their muzzle and hold out the bottle—then stop and offer a treat
 - Then go back: reach and just tilt their muzzle—stop and offer a treat.

In this way you can practice normalizing the process at various times throughout the day that doesn't require the full action. *If your dog wants to opt out, that's ok, because it's only practice.* By pairing the process with food, we work to create a more positive association with the process.

- **Take lots of BREAKS whenever possible.** You don't have to get all the eye drops in at once, or go deep into the ear right away. Even when offering the real medication, you can go in stages!
- **Work to train cooperative care behaviors.** All of these strategies are fairly surface level; *it is fully possible to train a dog to actively and voluntarily participate in taking their meds.* If you are interested in learning more, you can sign up for a [free behavior helpline](#), or watch our cooperative care webinar [Training for Trust](#), which will walk you through the process step by step.