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Problems with Veterinary Care/Treatment

DIFFICULT TO ADMINISTER INJECTIONS

Some horses have a phobia about needles. They won't stand still for injections, or they may react violently if they think you are going to give them a "shot"—rushing backward, rearing, striking, or kicking. This habit is usually due to a vet or handler's poor injection techniques in the past that were painful for the horse.

PROBLEMS WITH
VETERINARY
CARE/TREATMENT

How to Change This Habit

SOLUTION
1

First, you must make sure your injection technique is totally painless to the horse: He should not feel the needle at all. Here are a few suggestions:

- Use a new, sharp needle of the smallest possible diameter that will still carry adequate flow for the liquid being injected. Never use anything larger than an 18-gauge needle for intramuscular injections (for most vaccinations a 20-gauge needle is used) as a larger size causes more

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discomfort and leakage. A very sharp needle goes in more easily and so causes less pain than a dull one.

- If the horse fidgets or resents intramuscular shots in the neck, inject into the pectoral (chest) muscle(s). The horse is not very sensitive in this area and is less apt to feel the needle. This is also a preferred location if a horse tends to develop swelling or soreness after an injection. A sore or swollen neck affects the horse's movement more (causing stiffness in turning) and also makes it painful and/or difficult for the horse to lower his head to eat and drink. For a large shot, note that the pectoral isn't a big enough muscle to absorb it; split it into two doses (one in each pectoral muscle). It is preferable to choose a site close to his front end so you are better able to control him or move with him if necessary. You are more apt to be kicked if you are trying to inject into the area below his buttocks, for instance (even though that can be a good site for a large intramuscular injection due to the heavy muscling).
- Detach the needle from the syringe. Press firmly on the area where you'll put the needle (with your thumb or the side of your hand), to temporarily desensitize the area, then slip the needle in quickly. Some people thump the area a couple times with the side of the hand holding the needle, or give a slap against the side of the neck, which also works to desensitize the area, but if the horse is "needle shy," he's probably already experienced this technique and will become suspicious. Firmly pressing the spot may be less likely to arouse suspicion.
- Another way to desensitize the skin and mask the prick of the needle is to pinch or twist the skin just before you put the needle in. This works well when using the neck or pectoral muscle because the overlying skin (especially on the chest) is loose enough to pinch between your fingers. Press the area firmly, then twist the skin, and the horse will rarely feel the needle—especially

if you routinely do some pressing and pinching during ordinary grooming and handling.

- Insert the needle (as mentioned, detached from the syringe is best) quickly with one swift motion. The mistake some people make is not pushing forcefully enough. The faster the needle goes in, the less it will hurt the horse. The advantage of putting the needle first, before attaching it to the syringe, is that you can then wait a moment if the horse jumps or moves. Once he's settled down and calm, you can quietly attach the syringe and proceed with the injection. Note: Always make sure the needle hasn't gone in to a blood vessel. If blood starts oozing out of the inserted needle before you attach the syringe, take it out and try again, using a slightly different location.

SOLUTION
2

In order to give a shot to a suspicious horse (one that has had bad experiences with injections in the past), you must trick him so he doesn't know or suspect that he's about to get one. The best solution is to provide some kind of distraction so he's not thinking about the shot and therefore won't react adversely in anticipation. One of the best distractions is food.

If he's in a stall or paddock without access to green grass, often the best thing to offer him is a big bouquet of lush green grass. Have a friend hold the horse and hand-feed him plenty of grass to keep his attention as you give the injection. Other options include grain or treats/horse cookies. Whatever you use, it must be something he's eager to eat so he'll be completely focused on the food.

SOLUTION
3

When the horse cannot be distracted with food, try using a blindfold. If he stands quietly while blindfolded, you can rub him on his neck and withers for a while until you have him calm and relaxed, and slip the needle in only after desensitizing the area with your rubbing and/or a skin tweak (see Solution 1, p. 136).



Have an assistant hold the horse rather than tying him (he will be less likely to throw a fit if he doesn't feel trapped) and use a "shoulder twitch" (or "skin twitch") if need be to keep him distracted and still. A shoulder twitch consists of grasping the loose skin on the horse's shoulder and pulling it tight with the hand, rolling it a little over your knuckles. The pull on the skin stimulates endorphin release, which helps calm the horse.

What If Nothing Works?

If a horse still has an unreasonable fear and is dangerous to vaccinate, you may have to consider using a "lip twitch" (loop of rope or chain on a long handle or metal clamp that squeezes the horse's nose/upper lip and is believed to stimulate endorphin release) or a Stableizer® to keep him calm so you can slip the needle in without causing him pain or risking your safety.

DIFFICULT TO APPLY EYE OINTMENT/ TREATMENT

Most horses are very sensitive about their eyes, and putting medication into an eye can therefore be a difficult challenge. Even a gentle horse that trusts you may resist and throw his head in the air or rush backward when you attempt to treat an eye.

How to Change This Habit



Spend a lot of time working with the horse's head and face in your daily interactions and training sessions. Rub the areas around both eyes (but not too close to them), using advance-and-retreat techniques (going closer, then backing away to an area where he was comfortable with your touch before coming closer again). Work toward the horse allowing you to gently cup your hand over each eye without touching it. If he raises his head to avoid your touch,

work on lessons for lowering his head (see p. 59) giving him treats, if necessary, as a reward. Take your time and be patient. When *you* are tense or in a hurry the horse is more likely to become upset.

» **Work toward the horse allowing you to gently cup your hand over each of his eyes.**



If the horse accepts having your hands near his eyes, consider your technique when applying the ointment.

- Stand facing the side of his head and slide your hand (the one nearest his neck) under the cheek piece of his halter, so that if he moves your hand will move with him.
- Place the tube of eye medication in that hand, and point it toward the front corner of the horse's eye. Hold the tube parallel with the eye so it won't be so apt to bump the eye if he moves.
- Rest the wrist of your opposite hand against the side of the horse's nose/face and put the thumb of that hand against his lower eyelid near the front corner of the eye.
- Use this thumb to roll the lower eyelid down and your index finger to push upward on the upper eyelid to keep the horse from shutting his eye tightly.
- Gently place the tip of the medication tube in the corner of his eye and draw it carefully along the inside of the lower eyelid as you squeeze out a string of ointment, depositing it along the membrane of the inner lower eyelid. With good luck, the horse cooperates and you can release the eyelids so he can close his eye following this application.
- Use your thumb to gently massage the lower eyelid to help spread the medication around.



If necessary, squeeze the proper amount of medication onto your clean finger (or wear a surgical glove if you don't want it in contact with your skin). Repeat the process described in Solution 2 for holding the upper and lower eyelids open. Once the lower eyelid is exposed, gently transfer/scrape the ointment from your finger onto the inner part of the lid and release the lid, allowing the horse to close his eye and spread the medication around. This method is often less confrontational to many horses and so they are more apt to stand still.

» You can squeeze the eye ointment onto your finger and then gently transfer/scrape the ointment from your finger onto the inner part of the horse's eyelid.

What If Nothing Works?

When the horse is too touchy about his eyes to stand still enough for applying necessary medication, consider having an assistant help you and using a shoulder or nose twitch or a Stableizer® (see p. 138).

DIFFICULT TO CHECK HEART RATE

Some horses resent it when you check their heart rate because they don't like the feel of the stethoscope pressing against their rib cage. They fidget and move away to try to avoid it.

How to Change This Habit



Spend time getting the horse used to having a small, firm object pressed against his rib cage in various locations, including the sensitive girth area. If you do this during routine grooming, using advance-and-retreat tactics (see p. 120), most horses come to accept it over time.

SOLUTION
2

If the horse remains ticklish in the girth area and fidgety when the stethoscope makes an appearance, use an alternative method to check heart rate. Place your fingers on any large artery and you can feel it pulsing, enabling you to count his heart rate. One of the best places to press is the lower jaw: If you run your fingers along the underside of the jawbone, you'll find a large artery (it feels like a small firm cord). Another easy location is the lower leg: An artery runs under the fetlock joint on both sides, and with practice you can find it.

To measure his heart rate, press the artery slightly and count the number of "pulses" in 15 seconds, then multiply that number by four. The horse's average resting heart rate should be between 32 and 44 beats per minute.

- » **Place your fingers on any of the horse's large arteries, and you can feel it pulsing, enabling you to count his heart rate.**

**PROBLEMS WITH
VETERINARY
CARE/TREATMENT**

What If Nothing Works?

If you continue to have trouble checking the horse's heart rate, seek assistance from an experienced horse person or trainer.

DIFFICULT TO DEWORM OR GIVE ORAL MEDICATION

Some horses refuse to let you put anything into their mouths and are hard to deworm or medicate by oral syringe. They flip their heads up, rush backward, or may rear or strike. Every young horse should be trained to accept having things inserted into the corner of his mouth (your finger, an oral dose syringe) as part of routine handling, but when your horse has already developed the avoidance habit, it makes your job harder. Especially if the only things you ever put into his mouth taste nasty.

- » Every young horse should be trained to accept having things inserted into the corner of his mouth as part of routine handling.

How to Change This Habit

SOLUTION
1

When dealing with an older horse that already has a fear of the deworming process or oral medication, start over with mouth handling basics. Rub and massage the horse's head/face and muzzle area every time you handle him. If you routinely rub the sides of his mouth in a neutral setting (that is, you're not trying to give him any kind of medication) most horses will become at ease with your touch. Once the horse is relaxed about your hands on his muzzle, start putting a finger into the corners of his mouth every once in a while. If this alarms him, smear a little molasses or applesauce on your finger so he'll be more willing to have it in his mouth. When he is comfortable with the finger going in, start wiggling it around in the interdental space between the incisors and molars (where teeth do not grow from the gums). Use advance and retreat: If at any time the horse becomes tense or alarmed, go back to an earlier step that he's comfortable with.

SOLUTION
2

When the horse is at ease having your finger in his mouth, accustom him to the feel of a small syringe (finger-size), slipping it into the corner of his mouth. Fill it with a molasses/water mix or some runny applesauce, and make sure there's some of this "treat" on the outside of the syringe, as well, so it smells and tastes good as you stick it into his mouth. Even if he protests at first, if you can squirt a little of the "good stuff" into his mouth before he dislodges the syringe with a flip of his head or by rushing backward, he'll start to reconsider. Once he realizes that a syringe in his mouth means he's going to get something that tastes good rather than bad, he will change his behavior.