

## **Use of Rectal Thermometers and Administration of Oral and Ophthalmic Medications in Horses**

Our topics for this week are:

- Safe use of rectal thermometers in horses
- Administering medications by mouth to horses
- Medicating the eyes of horses

### **PLACEMENT OF RECTAL THERMOMETERS**

Rectal temperatures are routinely taken on horses with minimal head restraint. Using a halter and lead rope, an assistant should hold the horse or if the horse is well tamed, it can be tied by the lead rope. In either case, the horse should be positioned near a wall or strong fence. The handler should walk next to the left side of the horse and stand with his body touching the left flank with his left hand on top of the horse's rump. The handler grasps the base of the tail with his left hand and slightly lifts the tail. While holding a lubricated thermometer in his right hand, the handler leans toward the horse's anus. The right hand should be slid over the left hip toward the anus to prevent startling the horse. The thermometer is then placed in the rectum.

Rectal thermometers must be held the entire time they are in a horse's rectum or they will be expelled or sucked internally. Another option is to use a string tied to the thermometer with a clip on the other end of the string. The clip can then be clipped to a pinch of tail hairs. This prevents the thermometer from being sucked up the rectum but still permits expulsion of the thermometer.

### **ADMINISTRATION OF ORAL AND OPHTHALMIC MEDICATIONS**

#### **Oral**

Although giving oral medications to horses is usually not difficult, it is helpful if the medication or its vehicle tastes pleasant to the horse. Tablets can be crushed with a mortar and pestle, small plastic pill crusher, or a medication-dedicated coffee grinder. Crushed medication may be added to a paste of applesauce, corn syrup, molasses and brown sugar, banana, cherries, shredded carrots, peppermint, pudding, peanut butter, or yogurt to improve palatability. Palatable medications can often be added to the horse's grain or a treat such as a small amount of alfalfa pellets to successfully administer the medication. If this is not possible or effective, an oral syringe may be used. The paste should not be administered into the cheek pouch. Instead, it should be placed in the interdental space ("bars of the mouth") and injected on top of the tongue. A balling gun to deliver tablets (boluses) should never be used on a horse due to the risk of injury to the horse or handler.

Before giving a paste by oral syringe, there should be no grass or hay in the mouth, which could enable the horse to mix it with the paste and spit it out. To administer the oral medication with a syringe from the horse's left side, the handler should put his left fingers on the halter's noseband and thumb in corner of its mouth while standing close to the horse's shoulder and

bending the horse's nose toward the handler. The syringe is held in the right hand. The back of the right hand is pressed against the horse's cheek and the hand rotated to place the syringe into the left bars of the mouth beneath the thumb of the left hand. After inserting the tip of the oral syringe into the mouth, it is angled toward the throat and the syringe plunger pushed slowly to deliver the medication to the top of the tongue.

Administration of large volumes of oral fluids requires the passage of a stomach tube, which is done through a nasal passage. The horse is restrained with a long-handled nose twitch for the passage of the nasal tube.

### **Ophthalmic**

Horses have the largest eyes of any land animal. The size of their eyes alone puts them at high risk of injuries. Like all animals, horses are protective of painful eyes. Even if they stand still for exam and treatment, they have very strong palpebral muscles which clamp the eye fissure shut. Treatment with dropper bottles or ointment tubes can be attempted by stabilizing the heel of the hand holding the medication on the horse's skull above the affected eye. The handler's other hand pulls the lower lid down to open the palpebral fissure and drop the medication onto the eye or inner surface of the lower lid.

Another method of administering ophthalmic ointment is to wear a sterile glove and place ointment on the gloved index finger. The handler's ungloved hand is used to open the palpebral fissure while the gloved finger scrapes the ointment onto the inside surface of the lower lid.

When ophthalmic medications are administered, the treatment hand should be stabilized against the horse's head and move with movements of the horse's head. This should be done with constant pressure rather than the more hazardous method of running a hand under a halter to stabilize the head. Maintaining pressure against head reduces the risk of poking the horse's eye and blocks a horse's head swinging without impediment into a handler's head.

Reliable administration of ophthalmic medications to horses often requires sedation and placement of a subpalpebral or nasolacrimal tube.

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. To place a rectal thermometer in a horse, the handler must stand in front of a hip, use the near hand to lift the tail, and lean toward the rectum for placement with the off hand.**
- 2. Oral syringes should be placed in the bars of the mouth to deliver oral medications to the upper surface of the tongue.**
- 3. Placement of eye medications can be dangerous due to risk of being hit by a horse's head while he attempts to evade restraint or being struck by a front hoof from a resisting horse.**

Abby says it is time to wrap up this episode.

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at: [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com)

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.