

MEDICATING YOUR DOG



Giving a dog medication can be unpleasant, for both you and your dog. Some dogs—the “I’ll eat anything, anytime” types—are easy to medicate by hiding a pill in a soft treat, as long as they’re not feeling queasy. But this doesn’t work for all dogs, especially dogs who are off their food. And some treatments are nonoral— ear drops, eye drops, and injections, for example. If you can’t hide your dog’s medication in food, please give them a heads up that it is coming. Here’s how, and why.

As you prepare your dog’s medication but before you head towards them, give your dog a warning. Say something like “Sorry, pill time.” It feels counter-intuitive to warn them, like you’ll make things worse or give him a chance to escape—but this is a time when our intuition fails us. Warning your dog that something unpleasant but unavoidable is coming tells him that this time, but only this time, your approach is bad news. This allows your dog to differentiate good approaches from bad. Over time, they will learn that every other time you approach them, it will be for affection, or to go for a walk, or just because you are walking by—in other words, your dog will be able to say “ah, they’re coming over again, but I know it’s OK because I didn’t hear that phrase.”

If you do not warn your dog that you are about to medicate them, you may find they starts to startle, duck their head, or slink away every time you approach. You can re-teach them later that your approaches are safe, but it is much better to teach him a rule from the start: your approach is always safe and good, except when you say that warning phrase.

In addition to giving fair warning, whenever possible, give your dog something they likes right after you are finished medicating, like a game of fetch or tug, or a walk. Over time, this helps them learn that the medication predicts the good stuff, which softens the blow and can even help them enjoy the medication. And, if they are hungry, go ahead and give them something tasty after the medication unless otherwise specified by your veterinarian.