

The Cat Doc: Helping the medicine go down



Mrs. Matthews looked at me and raised her eyebrows. “You want me to get Mittens to take that?” she asked.

We were ending Mittens’ examination and I was showing her the antibiotic tablets he needed for an infected leg wound. I smiled and said that we could dispense a liquid medication instead, but I really thought the tablets would be easier since Mittens was such a gentle cat.

“Okay, show me how,” she replied. To her surprise, Mittens cooperated and she gave me a big smile.

One of the challenges of being a cat owner is getting medications into our pets. As most cat owners know, their loving kitty can turn into a man-eating tiger when it comes to taking medicine. Here are some hints for making medicating your cat less traumatic for each of you!

The most important aspect of getting medicine into a cat is being confident. This may sound strange, but believe it or not, your cat knows when you are intimidated and will take full advantage of the situation. Cats are extremely good at reading body language. A positive attitude about getting the medicine into the cat’s mouth is necessary for success. If you start the process with doubts, you will likely fail.

Medicating cats is more easily achieved by placing the animal up on a table or counter. By doing so you are making it easier for you to handle the pet and taking the cat off of its “turf”. The harder that you try to hold a cat down to medicate, the more it will resist. Minimal restraint is best. Wrapping a cat in a towel like a baby is necessary in some cases.



Varying the medicating routine is helpful. If you give medicine at an exact time each day and go through the same preliminary steps to prepare, your cat may get smart and be nowhere in sight when the time comes. Giving a treat as a reward after medicating can serve as positive reinforcement to the cat.

Hints for Medicating

Liquid medications can be dosed from either an eyedropper or a syringe without a needle. Small volumes, up to 0.5 ml, can usually be given in one squirt. Larger volumes may need to be split into 3 or more smaller squirts. You do not need to pry the cat’s mouth open to give liquids. Simply insert the tip of the dropper into the corner of the mouth, lift the cat’s chin, and squirt slowly.

Cats have a great sense of smell, so mixing liquids in with food is generally unsuccessful. Many of the antibiotic drops are “fruity” and have sweet tastes and smells. They are not the perfect compliment for a tuna dinner.

Tablets or capsules can sometimes be crushed and successfully mixed into food, but learning to directly “pill” a cat is best. The cat’s head needs to be grasped around the cheekbones, and then tilted so that the cat’s nose is pointing towards the ceiling. When done correctly, the cat’s mouth will automatically be open, and a finger is used to pop the pill over the back of the cat’s tongue.

Many cats will gag and foam after being medicated. This can be due to bad taste of the medication, not swallowing initially, or stress. Foaming is only rarely due to an allergic reaction to the medication, so do not panic if your cat begins to drool.

Plastic pill guns are available if putting your finger into the cat’s mouth is dangerous or unsuccessful. Coating a pill with butter, cheese, or hairball lubricant is another option. It will make the pill taste better and slide more easily down the throat.



My favorite products for medicating cats are Pill Pockets. These are moldable treats that can be placed around a pill. They come in chicken and salmon flavors for cats, and I think that 75% of cats that like treats will take a pill in a Pill Pocket. Pill Pockets are available at vet clinics and some pet stores.

Compounding pharmacies can take medications and re-formulate them into liquids and chews that cats prefer or into sizes that are easier to administer. A few medications can be made into transdermal gels that are rubbed inside the ears for treatment. If you are having difficulty with medication, ask your vet if it can be re-formulated. This can add cost to the product, but it is worth it if you are then able to get it into your pet.

Finding pills under cushions or behind sofas means that you have been outsmarted again. Communicate with your veterinarian if you are having problems medicating, because he or she wants your cat to get well too.

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