

Hints on Administering Herbs to Animals

Compiled by members of the Veterinary Botanical Medicine Association

Herbs can be beneficial to animals when medications are not working or resulting in side effects, or where an animal caretaker would prefer to try the natural medicine approach first. The administration of these herbs can be challenging at times. Here are a few suggestions on making their administration easier for both you and your animal companion. Sometimes, the effect of the herb depends on the patient actually being able to taste it, but in most cases, we have the option of trying to trick our pets into taking herbs by disguising the taste in an 'herb delivery system'.

(Please consult your veterinary herbalist for information on the best quality herbs, the correct doses and the best ways of giving them for your animals. Giving the wrong herbs, or giving the correct herbs at incorrect doses can damage your animal's health seriously. This is especially important if your animal is on other medication. Drug-herb interactions are real. Talk to your veterinary herbalist about this).

Medicating Dogs and Cats

Dogs and cats can be given powdered herbs, powder herb extracts and liquid herbal extracts in their meals. If the patient's appetite is poor due to illness or learned preferences, you may need to disguise the taste further by using especially strong-smelling foods, like tuna, a sardine, or braunschweiger. For some pets, baby food or canned cat food is such a novelty that they will take the herbs mixed into these foods. Some pharmacies and veterinary manufacturers make flavored 'tab wraps' for dogs and cats, especially designed to hide small tablets. Other tasty treats to hide the herbs include cream cheese, peanut or other nut butters, ground meat or liver, or fruit. Apple sauce is particularly recommended by some herbalists.

Powdered herbs may be mixed into small 'pills' of butter, then frozen to increase firmness. It may be easier in some cases to administer the powdered or liquid herbs mixed in a liquid, to be gently and slowly administered by syringe. Vehicles that have been recommended include meat or poultry broth, clam juice, flavored syrups (one veterinary product is VAL syrup™), and fruit juice.

You can take advantage of your cat's fastidiousness by mixing the herb in a hairball gel (such as VetBasis (petroleum free) or Laxatone™) or anchovy paste, and smearing it on his or her paws – only very sick cats will let that insult go unchallenged! Some herbalists use traditional teas - these can be made using meat broth instead of plainwater, and frozen in ice cube trays to preserve until the day of use.

Liquid herbal extracts are often not accepted in any form by some animals. In this case, you can use a dropper to put the extract in a capsule, close it, and administer to the animal in that form within a few minutes.

If herb capsules must be administered, they often 'go down' easier if one end is covered in butter. Be sure to administer water or broth afterwards to ensure that the capsule passes from the esophagus to the stomach quickly.

Rabbits may sometimes be medicated by grinding herbs into their pellets with a coffee grinder. Strawberry jam is said to be effective in disguising the taste before administration to exotic species. Birds, especially parrots, seem to accept liquid extracts when dropped onto a cracker.

Your veterinary herbalist may also recommend other routes of administration, such as by enema. This is especially appropriate for vomiting animals.

If your pet has food allergies or any other illness, check the herb delivery system with your veterinarian before using it.

Medicating Horses and Farm Animals

Horses and ruminant farm animals are herbivores – natural grazers, used to eating many different plant materials. They usually accept herbs mixed in their grain and pellet rations. If that doesn't work, apple sauce, molasses, or frozen concentrated fruit juices can be effective vehicles.

Final Cautions

Some animals will not tolerate herbs in any form, and we must accept that in some cases, insisting on the continued administration of these medications can effect their quality of life. If your pet won't accept herbs, discuss this with your veterinary herbalist.