

*If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Behavior and Training Department by phone: 410-235-8826 Ext. 151 or by email: trainer@mdspca.org.

When 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 non-oral—ear drops, eye drops, and injections, for example. If you can’t hide your dog’s medication in food, please give him a heads up that it is coming. Here’s how, and why.

As you prepare your dog’s medication but before you head towards him, give your dog a warning. Say something like “Sorry, pill time.” It feels counter-intuitive to warn him, 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, he will learn that every other time you approach him, 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 him, you may find he starts to startle, duck his head, or slink away every time you approach. You can re-teach him 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 he likes right after you are finished medicating, like a game of fetch or tug, or a walk. Over time, this helps him learn that the medication predicts the good stuff, which softens the blow and can even help him enjoy the medication. And, if he is hungry, go ahead and give him something tasty after the medication unless otherwise specified by your veterinarian.