

# Training Dogs to Love Receiving Oral Medications\*

By Dr. Sophia Yin

## OVERVIEW

We can train animals to love procedures and other things that they dislike or even hate by combining the process of **counterconditioning** with **desensitization**.

With **classical counterconditioning** we train the pet to associate the handling with things she likes such as food, treats, petting, or play so that she's in a positive emotional state rather than feeling fearful or angry. We generally combine counterconditioning with **desensitization**, meaning that we start by introducing the handling or aversive stimulus at a level that the pet barely notices and gradually increase the level. The goal throughout the process is that the pet always acts as though she doesn't even notice the handling or stimulus that she previously disliked.

With **operant counterconditioning**, we train the pet to perform a behavior that's incompatible with the undesirable behavior. Ideally the pet earns a reward so that she's simultaneously learning a positive association with the situation. For instance, we may reward a pet for remaining stationary and calm while you perform a given procedure.

### Part 1: Training dogs to love being pillied.

For dogs who can't be tricked by hiding the pill in food, we can train them to enjoy being pillied.



**Fig.A, Incorrect:** This dog, hates being pillied. She can smell pills hidden in Pill Pockets, cheese or meat. To pill dogs like this, use several treats in a row to countercondition. Then give the pill.



**Fig.B:** Make sure the dog waits politely to take the treat. Hold the treat out of the dog's reach until she sits patiently.



**Fig.C:** Grasp the dog's muzzle while holding the treat in front of her. There is no need to try to open her mouth. At this stage the goal is to just get her used to having your hand on her muzzle.

\*To see video depicting this protocol go to [www.AskDrYin.com](http://www.AskDrYin.com).

**This page is excerpted from, *Low Stress Handling, Restraint and Behavior Modification of Dogs and Cats*, by Dr. Sophia Yin. ([www.nerdbook.com](http://www.nerdbook.com))**

For more information about animal behavior, go to [www.AskDrYin.com](http://www.AskDrYin.com), where you can view free and subscription-based videos that provide step-by-step behavior modification instructions.

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Fig.D

**Fig.D** Next, push the treat right up to the dog's mouth so she doesn't have to reach to get it. Repeat several times.



Fig.E

**Fig.E:** Once she's clearly expecting treats, work on opening her mouth. Hold the treat between your index finger and thumb. Place your third or fourth finger in the region of the lower incisors, avoiding the canines.



Fig.F

**Fig.F:** Open the mouth and place the treat at the base of her tongue before she has a chance to resist.

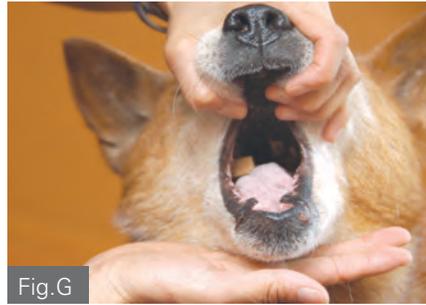


Fig.G

**Fig.G:** As soon as you toss the treat in, close her mouth.



Fig.H

**Fig.H:** Repeat this procedure several more times. Then, when she has come to expect receiving treats this way, give her the pill instead. It can be hidden in a Pill Pocket or a treat. Immediately follow with another treat so that we end with a positive experience. Remember to follow with multiple treats or a liquid chaser so the pill does not get stuck in her esophagus.

- Tip:**
1. Avoid tilting her nose up at a sharp angle, as this can inhibit swallowing.
  2. Downward stroking of the throat can encourage swallowing.
  3. If the pill is given without treats, follow with some treats or water so the pill does not get stuck, causing esophagitis.

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## Part 2: Administering liquids.

Liquids can be administered in the same manner as pills, except that the mouth only needs to be opened a little because the syringe can be inserted into the side of the mouth. Additionally, the head should not be tilted up; hold it level to prevent squirting liquids into the throat. Dogs who don't hold still for liquid medications can be counterconditioned quickly in the following manner.



Fig.I



Fig.J

**Fig.I:** The goal is to teach the dog to associate the syringe in his mouth with positive experiences. Put canned cheese or a semi-moist treat on the syringe. The treat won't mask the taste, but it will put the pet in a positive emotional state.

**Fig.J:** Let the dog lick the treat off the syringe or medication dispenser. When he consistently tries to lick the syringe as soon as he sees it, whether or not there's food on it, you know he associates it with good things and is ready to be medicated.



Fig.K



Fig.L

**Fig.K, L:** Restrain the dog's body against you so that the dog can't back up, and restrain his head with one hand in a U hold. With the treat on it and the medication inside, insert the syringe into the side of the mouth. While the dog is licking the treat, inject the medication. Hold the dog's head up so that he can't spit out the medication. If he acts like he doesn't like the taste, quickly shove a treat into his mouth as a positive distraction. But only do this if he will readily take the treat when you put it right up to his face. Talk to him in a happy voice if he responds by acting happy. The goal is to get him into a happy state or play mode with another treat so that we end with a positive experience. Remember to follow with multiple treats or a liquid chaser so the pill does not get stuck in his esophagus.

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