

Training Cats 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 to remain stationary and calm while you perform a given procedure.

Part 1: Training cats to love being pillied.



Fig.A

Fig.A, Step 1a: Start by putting treats (or wet food) in the pill gun and letting the cat eat from it.



Fig.B

Fig.B, Step 1b: When the cat consistently looks at the pill gun as if she is expecting a treat, continue to the next step.

*To see video depicting this protocol go to 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)

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

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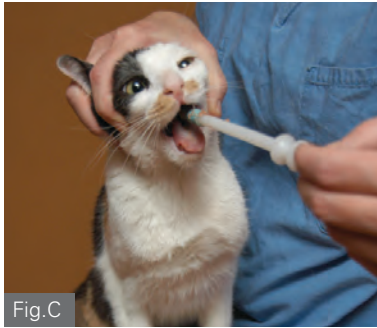


Fig.C, Step 2: Physically hold the cat's head up so she learns that restraint in this manner predicts a treat is coming. Place the pill gun in her mouth and deposit the treat or canned food.



Fig.D, Step 3: Immediately close the mouth and control the head. Repeat the process until it's clear she has a positive association with the restraint and pill gun. When you use an actual pill, open the mouth, place the pill in, close the mouth and immediately follow with a treat. The pill can be covered in canned food or baby food if needed.

Part 2: Giving liquids.



Fig.E: Countercondition the cat to the syringe. If the cat is fearful of syringes or just doesn't like taking liquid medications, countercondition her by regularly letting her eat treats such as canned food or tuna off the syringe. Start the counterconditioning procedure by simply placing the syringe in or near the cat's food bowl during feeding time if needed.



Fig.F: This cat needs no restraint to accept the tuna-laden syringe. The next step in counterconditioning is to restrain her head slightly and then present the tuna and syringe. This trains her to accept the head restraint.



Fig.G, H: Holding the cat's head, insert the syringe from the side of the mouth and squirt the liquid in. Because liquids are more likely than pills or capsules to enter the trachea, keep the head level. Do not tilt it backward, as is done when pilling. If you're worried about accidentally squirting liquid down the cat's throat, aim the syringe up at the roof of the mouth. Be sure to still keep the head level. If the cat struggles at all, countercondition her to the syringe. Alternatively, you can squirt the liquid onto the roof of the mouth if the cat's mouth is wide open.

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