



## Lincoln Land Animal Clinic, Ltd.

Animal Behavior Services

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## Teaching your pet to take medication

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Our goal is to improve the pet's perception of the pill popper. If it always predicts food, its presence will start to mean good things are happening not bad things. It is important to meal feed your pet. If they have free access to food, it is difficult to use it to reinforce good behavior or to help them make a positive association with unpleasant things.

1. Buy a pill popper.
2. Determine the soft food\* items that your pet loves. This might include chicken, beef, salmon, tuna, spray cheese, cream cheese, liver paste, and peanut butter to name a few. The food should be so good that your pet will stop what they are doing and run to you.
3. Hold the pill popper up so that your pet can see it prior to:
  - a. Preparing its meal.
  - b. Opening a bag of treats.
  - c. The pill popper should be like Pavlov's bell. They see it, you prepare the food/treat and then give your pet their food.
  - d. When the pet starts running toward you when you pick up the pill popper it is time to move on to the next step.
4. Place food\* on the outside of the pill popper. Place the pill popper in the bowl or on a plate and leave. Repeat\*\* until your pet is eagerly eating the food off of the pill popper.
  - a. Gradually stay closer and closer to your cat while eating off of the pill popper.
    - i. You can even put smaller portions of food on the pill popper and reload it several times, so that your approach indicates more food on the pill popper.
5. Place delicious food on the outside of the pill popper and continue to hold the pill popper in your hand. Does your pet enthusiastically grab at it or back away? If they grab at the pill popper proceed to the next step. If they do not, please continue to practice step 4a. In all of the following steps and **anytime** you use the pill popper, you will place canned or delicious food on the outside.\*\*\*
6. Place a small pill sized piece of semi moist food (greenies pill pockets, cream cheese, braunschweiger, tuna paste- whatever your pet loves) in the pill chamber of the pill popper, and food\* on the outside. It should not take long for your pet to grab the pill popper in their mouth. Repeat. Continue playing this game.
7. Intermittently add a piece of kibble in the middle of the semi moist food. You do not need to jam the popper in the back of your pet's mouth, as most pets are so excited about the prospect

of the delicious food that they grab on to the pill popper themselves and will not let go! If this is not the response you are getting then please go back to step 4.

8. Once your pet is reliably taking the kibble with the popper, then add the medication.

When medicating your pet, it is important to continue to "play the game."

1. Load your popper with a "fake pill" (the semi moist food) and give that first.
2. Next give the medication wrapped in the semi moist food.
3. Finally repeat step one. We want to condition your pet to think things always come in three. If they have had a bad experience (inadvertently bite down on a pill) the goal is to "dilute" that experience with good experiences.

\*\*Repeat each session 3 times. Continue to repeat throughout the day or at meal/treat times. Repeat each step for as many days as it takes for your pet to come running to you when you have the pill popper. There should be no hesitation, nervousness or apprehension. The goal is for your pet to love the pill popper so that medicating your pet is easy!

\*\*\*While some medications are supposed to be taken on an empty stomach, I do not know of very many people who take medication without at least a little water. Most people are not taking their medicine by ramming a finger down the back of their mouth when they take pills. Why do we expect our pets to take pills dry? In the long term, it is better that our patients continue to take the medication, than have them not take it at all.