



Sedation for horses

The ins and outs of calming chemicals

Why sedate your horse?

The most common reasons to sedate are:

- Veterinary examinations or treatments
- Dental work
- Clipping
- Stressful events (fireworks)
- Travelling
- Box-resting
- Shoeing

Due to the various reasons for sedating horses, different sedatives options are available. Our vets and nurses can help guide you through the minefield of choosing which sedative is most appropriate for each occasion.

Safety First

The sedated horse may still be unpredictable. Likewise, certain precautions need to be taken when handling, feeding and riding them.

A sedated horse can never be considered totally safe. It might behave unpredictably at any time and sudden arousals can occur. Sedated horses may stumble, and even fall, but may still remain able to kick, barge, rear, etc. Only experienced and competent persons, who are aware of these risks, should handle or be near a sedated horse.

Due to incoordination, riding sedated horses can be dangerous.

Heavily sedated horses should have their feed withdrawn because they may not chew or swallow properly, and may be prone to choke.

How to administer?

There are several ways of administering sedatives to horses but largely some go in the mouth, whereas other presentations need to be injected, usually intravenously.

Oral administration is obviously more convenient and less expensive as it can be done by the owner or the groom. This is particularly useful for when mild sedation is needed, either for prolonged periods of time (such as box resting) or very frequently (such as for shoeing, trimming or clipping). Most oral presentations are not capable of producing profound and reliable sedation. One product needs to be wiped under the tongue and absorb from there.

Injecting sedative agents is much more reliable. The action can be more predicted and your vet, who has to administer it can top up the dose with their pharmacology knowledge. As an injection directly into the vein is needed, this method can be difficult with fractious horses. Intramuscular (into the muscle) administration is less predictable but can be necessary for unapproachable horses. Feral horses that need catching or pose a risk to traffic may need to be darted in order to administer their sedative dose into the muscle.

What sedative to use?

ACP (Acepromazine) Sedalin® paste / ACP injectable

ACP is used to reduce anxiety, tension and hyper-excitability. It also causes vaso-dilation (opening of the blood vessels) resulting in a reduction of blood pressure. It is available in two forms: an injectable solution and an oral paste (one brand of this paste is Sedalin®).

Sedalin is a form of ACP in a syringe that can be inserted into the mouth and administered like a worming paste. The palatable gel can also be mixed in with the horse's feed.

This drug only decreases anxiety and has only mild sedative effects. Horses can still react and kick accurately, and aggressive horses can occasionally become more so after administration.

The maximum effect of Sedalin is approximately 60 minutes after administration and lasts for 8-12 hours, although some effects can last up to 24 hours. No dependency or addiction has been reported. Long-term use, although not licensed, appears to be safe.

ACP is not licensed for use in pregnant or lactating mares, and should not be given to horses in shock, or animals with epilepsy. The injectable form of the drug is used before anaesthetics, or to enhance or prolong sedation by other products. ACP is a therapeutic agent for the treatment of laminitis and vets are debating whether it is its blood vessel dilation, sedative or other effects that makes it a significant treatment for acute laminitic horses.



Detomidine and Butorphanol

Detomidine and some of its derivatives (Romifidine and Xylazine) give very reliable and profound sedation when directly injected into the vein by your vet. It is used for many veterinary procedures, minor surgery and is the drug of choice for when real sedation, rather than minor calming is needed. The drug works even better when combined with butorphanol, an injectable morphine derivative. If the horse cannot be approached, higher doses of this drug can be used by intra-muscular injection, or even in a dart if the horse is difficult to approach. There is no evidence that these drugs are very addictive.

Fractious and dangerous horses can become manageable when sedated with these drugs. It does have to be borne in mind that some experience is needed to cope with sedated horses, and a farrier, or professional clipper should be asked whether they have that kind of experience. It is recommended that a second person should always be present when handling a sedated horse, in case the horse falls.

Horses will often give their owner the impression they may fall over, but this is thankfully a rare occurrence. The horse's head and neck will drop low, and they will become unsteady on their legs. Raising the head or trying to hold the horse up by the head collar are likely to be counterproductive and are more likely to lead to horses falling. Where possible, sedated horses should be positioned with a base-wide stance so that they stand with a leg in each corner.

Because these drugs have a pain-killing effect, care should be taken when potentially harmful procedures are undertaken. Sedation for certain procedures will mean that your vet may have to stay around to supervise the procedure. Certain dental or foot procedures could fall into this category. The vet who carries out sedation may assume responsibility for the actions of a para-professional. For that reason, sedation for certain procedures may result in the client needing to be prepared for a long vet attendance, even though the vet is not the one carrying out the procedure.

Detomidine Gel

Domosedan® gel has been launched more recently. It is a paste for oral dosing, but should not be swallowed by the horse. Instead, the sedative has to be applied to the area under the tongue and needs to be absorbed from there. It is easy to see how that is easier said than done in a fractious horse, and swallowing of the sedative will lead to expensive losses. A long delay in onset, as well as a short window of sedation, has made this not the most popular choice of sedation.

The maximum effect of Domosedan gel is said to be 30-40 minutes after administration, and lasts for approximately 2-3 hours. Sometimes the onset appears to be somewhat slower.

Neutraceuticals

We are not aware of any over the counter products that are capable of sedating horses. Some owners have seen mild improvements in trainability or calmness with products based on Valerian, Magnesium and certain B vitamins. We can advise you on the most suitable products to try. Serious compliance or trainability issues should always be discussed with one of our vets in case there are underlying health reasons for this, or to see whether other pharmaceuticals

Conclusion

Overall, sedation is a very effective way of carrying out certain procedures safely, without putting people or horses at risk. On the other hand, working around sedated horses is a skill in itself and the handlers do need some experience to do it safely. Sedation can only be done with prescription only drugs and vets can only administer them or legally dispense them to animals under their care. Choosing the most appropriate sedation and using it correctly will help make the best use of these potent drugs.