

A guide to Calmers, Sedatives and Anaesthetics

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For hundreds of years humans have used drugs and chemicals to help handle fractious animals and perform operations; the first anaesthetic used reliably was a mask which contained a rag soaked in chloroform! Things have come on a long way since then; vets are trained extensively at university to carry out anaesthetics and sedatives are now reliable and safe. There are four main classes of these drugs:



Blue Chip Karma: safe and legl to use in competitions.

1. Calmers

These are mainly available through your feed merchant, although some are sold through your vet only. They are not classed as drugs, only as feed supplements. Some calmers work well, some may only have a placebo effect and not all calmers work for all horses; each horse is different. Competition riders need to be aware that some calmers may contain certain ingredients that are not allowed under affiliated competition rules.

Equistro Equaliser™ is an example of one calmer available through your vet. This contains magnesium, B vitamins and L-Tryptophane, all in a completely utilisable form and with an optimum bioavailability.

Many calmers contain magnesium. This is because when a horse is highly strung or becomes stressed, anxious, nervous or excited, they burn off magnesium. This allows calcium to overload muscle and nerve cells and replicates the rise of adrenaline; which can cause erratic behaviour, aggressiveness and tightening of muscles.

2. Oral Sedatives

Do you worry about your horses behaviour for the dentist, farrier or for clipping? Which drugs are used by vets to restrain your horse for different treatments?

There are a variety of sedatives available; they are all prescription only medicines and available from your vet.

Acepromazine (ACP / Sedalin gel) is a tranquiliser rather than a sedative. It comes in a gel form and is easy to administer like a wormer. Sedalin gel is useful to 'take the edge off' certain horses and can

be used for horses on box rest who are getting fractious, for turning out excitable horses or for relaxing horses for the dentist, farrier or for clipping. The horse needs to be kept quiet for around 40 minutes after administration of the gel for maximum effect.

Domosedan gel

This is a new product, containing the drug detomidine. Detomidine is a drug that has been around in the intravenous form for over 20 years and provides excellent levels of sedation. The gel is given under the horses tongue and seems to induce sedation and analgesia with an effectiveness and recovery time comparable to the injection. This drug is stronger than Sedalin™ so may be useful for horses where Sedalin™ does not have enough of an effect but the horses are needle shy so intravenous sedation is not very practical. Currently we only use this drug in rare cases and do not dispense it routinely due to the strong nature of the drug it contains.



3. Intravenous sedatives



There are a variety of drugs used intravenously; these tend to belong to the group called α_2

agonists (Detomidine, Romifidine and Xylazine are some examples) and are only administered by a vet. They induce sedation within minutes of being injected and, depending upon which drug is used, usually last 30-60 minutes. These drugs are very useful for performing many standing procedures, for example, castrations, suturing wounds, performing complex dental procedures, carrying out a rectal examination, radiographing a horse, injecting joints, and performing gastroscopy. There are also many surgical procedures carried out under standing sedation in stocks, for example, laparoscopy (key hole surgery of the abdomen) and kissing spines surgery (removal of over-riding dorsal spinous processes). The same drugs will be used for these procedures but they will often be given as continuous rate infusions to provide reliable sedation over a longer period of time and they will also be combined with analgesics (painkillers).

As with many drugs there are various side effects which horse owners need to be aware of. After receiving a sedative a horse should have food withheld until it is fully awake and able to chew again, this is normally approximately 2 hours after the injection. Sedatives can also prolong gut transit time, therefore if a horse is being regularly sedated or sedated for a prolonged period of time, droppings should be monitored to check that the horse is not developing an impaction.

4. Anaesthetic Agents

Equine General Anaesthesia (GA) is a really underrated speciality within veterinary medicine. The surgeon tends to be the headline grabber for