

HANDLING YOUR MULE'S EARS

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Just how sensitive is a mule about having his ears handled? Initially, a mule is



not any more sensitive about his ears than he is about any other part of his body, but if he is never handled, or mishandled about his ears, he can be quite sensitive about any part of his body and particularly about his ears. Taking the time to desensitize your mule to touch and handling is

an important part of any training program, both for general management and for safety purposes.

The mule that has an aversion to having his ears handled poses a problem with management convenience, but more than that, he can be a safety hazard in many situations. For instance, it is inconvenient to have to disassemble your bridle to put it on, but should you accidentally touch his ears while doing this, he could thrash his head around and knock you silly! If you get in a difficult spot on a trail where you would have to dismount and move quickly, you would be unable to take the reins over his head to lead safely. While you tried, he could inadvertently knock you down, or throw himself over trying to fight you. If the mule is to be a completely safe riding animal, he must be desensitized about his head and body.

Desensitization should be humane and considerate, and not abusive. When we say we want to desensitize the animal, it simply means that we want him accustomed to touch and handling about his body, particularly in such areas as his head, legs and rear quarters where he is most apt to be the most sensitive. An animal that has not been desensitized will tend to react more

violently to touch. When teaching this, the touch should be presented in a pleasure able way, so the mule not only learns to tolerate it, but to actually enjoy it.

Old time methods such as "sacking out" are somewhat crude methods to desensitize an animal. Oftentimes, it creates more problems than it can solve. A mule "sacked" about the head can actually become more sensitive because of this inconsiderate approach.

To desensitize a mule who is sensitive about his ears is a long term process. First, you must maintain a firm, quiet and tolerant attitude. Nothing he does should make you angry enough to lose your temper and your patience. Make sure your mule is tacked with a stout, non-breakable halter. and lead. Ask him to come gently forward to a stout hitch rail, stroking his nose politely and gently, as he steps forward to you. If he won't come easily, just snub your lead on the hitch rail, so he can't go backwards and keep coaxing him forward until he comes. Wait as long as it takes for him to gain confidence enough to come forward. Do not get into a pulling, or pushing match with him. You will only create resistance in him and he will win because he weighs more!

When his nose is finally up to the rail, run your lead around the post and through the noseband on his halter twice, then, tie him off snugly, such that his nose is tied as closely as possible to the hitch rail, with no slack! Start by stroking his nose gently, and then work your way up his forehead toward the ears. Use soft, yet firm, gentle strokes.

Do not "pat" your mule; it's too threatening. Let the tips of your fingers find the base of the ear, away from the open side, and stroke upward toward the tip. At this point, he will probably thrash his head back and forth to avoid your touch. Just be slow, reassuring and gentle about your approach.

When he has allowed you to stroke the ear, even if for only a couple of seconds, leave your hand resting on the ear and feed him a rewarding treat from your free hand. Don't take your hand away from the ear until he is chewing calmly and not worried about the hand on his ear.



Do this only a couple of times each session. Then go to his shoulder and work your hand in a massaging fashion over his neck toward his ears. Let your fingers come over his poll while your thumb cradles an ear. Gently stroke upward with your thumb while leaving the rest of your hand over his poll. If he jerks away, just keep going back to the same position with your hand.

Next, you will be in the same position, but you will close your hand around his ear and hold it with just enough pressure that he cannot jerk your hand loose. Do not grab the ear, nor pull. Keep a quiet, light hold on the ear. If he pulls away, just tighten your grip on the ear until he stops pulling, then lighten again. Tighten and loosen your grip as needed. Tighten only when he pulls away and release immediately when he isn't. He will soon learn that if he doesn't fight it, there is no pain.

Do not tighten your grip any more than you need to hold onto the ear. We are not trying to induce pain!

When he is tolerant of you holding his ear in this fashion, you can introduce the clippers should you desire, using the same guidelines and tightening when he pulls, releasing when he submits. Introduce the bridle by keeping your right hand between his ears and by bringing the crown piece with your left hand over his nose and up his forehead. When your hands meet, transfer the crown piece into your right hand; insert the bit with your left hand,

and pull the crown piece up to the base of his ears. Change hands again, slowly, while you cup the fingers of your right hand around the base of his right ear. Bend it forward and under the crown piece. Keeping your palm firm on his poll, move slowly to the left ear and do the same.

The bridle is then in place. Reward your mule. Do not put on and remove the bridle any more than once per session. He needs to clearly know that this is not same obnoxious pastime you have discovered, but an act of necessity that is short-lived.

When the bridle is on, get to the business at hand and forget the ears for a while. When you return, tie him as before and remove the bridle gently, with both hands sliding the crown piece over both ears simultaneous so nothing gets caught in the process. Hesitate for a minute when it is off his ears and allow him to drop the bit before you remove the bridle the rest of the way.

When your mule gets used to having his ears handled and being bridled while snubbed and haltered, you can then begin dropping the halter and tying him loosely while being bridled.

Sometimes it takes a couple of weeks before you can drop the halter. It varies with the individual mule. Just be patient. Quiet, gentle perseverance will eventually win out and your mule's ears will be desensitized and quite manageable. After you have mastered his outer ear, you may find that your mule is one who enjoys having his inner ear stroked, or scratched. Most mules find this very pleasurable after they have overcome their fear.