

Purchasing Pet Drugs Online: Buyer Beware



“Discount pet drugs—no prescription required” may appeal to pet owners surfing the Web, but FDA experts say it can be risky to buy drugs online from sites that tout this message and others like it.

Some of the Internet sites that sell pet drugs represent legitimate, reputable pharmacies, says Martine Hartogensis, D.V.M., deputy director of the Office of Surveillance and Compliance in FDA’s Center for Veterinary Medicine (CVM). But others are fronts for unscrupulous businesses operating against the law.

FDA has found companies that sell unapproved pet drugs and counterfeit pet products, make fraudulent claims, dispense prescription drugs without requiring a prescription, and sell expired drugs.

Pet owners who purchase drugs from these companies may think they are saving money, says Hartogensis, but in reality, they may be short-changing their pet’s health and putting its life at risk.

CVM regulates the manufacture and distribution of animal drugs, while individual state pharmacy boards regulate the dispensing of prescription veterinary products.

Red Flags

Some foreign Internet pharmacies advertise that veterinary prescription

When ordering online

1. *Order from a Web site that belongs to a Vet-VIPPS accredited pharmacy.*
2. *Mail the prescription provided by your veterinarian to the pharmacy after your pet receives a physical examination.*
3. *Order from an outsourced prescription management service that your veterinarian uses.*

A veterinarian should physically examine an animal prior to making a diagnosis to determine the appropriate therapy.

drugs are available to U.S. citizens without a prescription. But, says Hartogensis, "There is a risk of the drugs not being FDA-approved."

A foreign or domestic pharmacy may claim that one of its veterinarians on staff will "evaluate" the pet after looking over a form filled out by the pet owner, and then prescribe the drug. "A veterinarian should physically examine an animal prior to making a diagnosis to determine the appropriate therapy," says Hartogensis.

CVM is especially concerned that pet owners are going online to buy two types of commonly used prescription veterinary drugs—nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and heartworm preventives.

"Both drugs can be dangerous if there is no professional involvement," says Hartogensis. "It's not generally a concern if the owner uses a legitimate online pharmacy and mails in a prescription from their veterinarian, who is monitoring the animal. But if there is no veterinarian-client-patient relationship, it's a dangerous practice."

NSAIDs and Heartworm Preventives

Veterinarians often prescribe NSAIDs to relieve pain in dogs. NSAIDs should not be purchased on the Internet without a veterinarian's involvement because

- dogs should undergo blood testing and a thorough physical examination before starting NSAIDs
- dogs should be monitored by a veterinarian while they are taking NSAIDs
- veterinarians should discuss possible side effects of NSAIDs with the owner

- the prescription should be accompanied by a Client Information Sheet that explains important safety information to the owner

Heartworm disease is a potentially fatal condition transmitted by the bite of a mosquito that is carrying infected larvae of the heartworm parasite. Dogs, cats, and ferrets can get heartworm. Heartworm preventives, given daily, monthly, or semiannually depending on the product, kill the larvae before they become adult worms.

The American Heartworm Society recommends

- using heartworm medication for dogs year-round, no matter where you live in the United States
- getting dogs tested yearly to make sure they're not infected with heartworm

"Testing is important even in dogs regularly treated with heartworm preventive products due to the occasional reports of product ineffectiveness," says Hartogensis. An Internet pharmacy veterinarian cannot draw blood from the animal to perform the test. If the test isn't done, a pet owner could be giving heartworm preventives to a dog that has heartworms, potentially leading to severe reactions.

Tips for Buying Pet Drugs Online

- Order from a Web site that belongs to a Vet-VIPPS accredited pharmacy. Vet-VIPPS—the Veterinary-Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites—is a voluntary accreditation program of the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy (NABP). NABP gives the



Vet-VIPPS seal to online pharmacies that dispense prescription animal drugs and comply with NABP's strict criteria, including federal and state licensing and inspection requirements, protecting patient confidentiality, quality assurance, and validity of prescription orders. Look for the Vet-VIPPS seal displayed on a pharmacy's Web site or check with NABP at www.nabp.net (click on "Accreditation Programs") to find out if a pharmacy is Vet-VIPPS accredited. Because this is a new program, begun in 2009, a small number of pharmacies are currently Vet-VIPPS accredited.

- Order from an outsourced prescription management service that your veterinarian uses.

These state-licensed Internet pharmacy services work directly with the veterinarian, require that a prescription be written by the veterinarian, and support the veterinarian-client-patient relationship. Ask your veterinary hospital if it uses an Internet pharmacy service.

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