

Risky Business!

Online Pet Pharmacies & Over-the-Counter Pet Medicine Sales

Professional announcers, paid celebrity endorsements and slick advertisements not only offer affordable pet prescriptions at discount prices, but also, at times, with no prescription required. Since pets are becoming more and more a part of the family and annual spending on pet products has reached more than \$60 billion dollars in the United States alone, these ads appeal to many pet owners who are unaware of the risks involved. A staple of such ads is that you can save a trip to the vet, but that is all too often not true. There are state and federal laws requiring a doctor-client (or, in this case, a veterinarian-pet) relationship in order to prescribe and dispense medication. The laws are vague regarding a time limit because many of the variables involved with illnesses, but, at the very least, a veterinarian must have examined the pet within the past 12 months. If the pet develops an illness, a new examination is frequently necessary in order to determine what is best for the pet in its current situation.

Without a doubt, there are a myriad of unique traits and considerations involved in treating a living creature. Cats are different from dogs which are, in turn, different from people, and some medications that help one can be fatal to another. Every pet is an individual with its own unique characteristics that may react differently to certain medications in specific instances. Your family veterinarian has all your pet's medical records on file and knows your entire pet family and can, therefore, make the best medical decisions to help, not harm your pet. In case of

an emergency or scary reaction to a medication, your veterinarian is local, and help is quickly available. Trying to contact a pharmacy through the Internet or asking a retail salesperson for medical help is not the way to go if your pet needs immediate assistance.

The manufacturers of many pet medications will only distribute their products through licensed veterinarians as to assure that they are stored properly and dispensed with the correct instructions. In addition, by keeping the supply line limited to medical professionals, it helps the manufacturers to combat counterfeit products that are available in the marketplace. Although there are reputable pharmacies online, there are many other Internet businesses that are breaking multiple laws in the pursuit of profits at the pet owner's expense. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is addressing this problem- which has gotten much worse in the past few years -by working with the National Board of Pharmacies to institute a voluntary accreditation program. Vet-VIPPS, an acronym for "Veterinary Verified Internet Pet Pharmacy Sites," is certainly a step in the right direction, but some verified members have a history of multiple violations and fines from state and federal authorities.

The FDA further recommends you, as a pet owner, follow the A.W.A.R.E. guidelines:

Ask Your Veterinarian-Your vet's priority is your pet's health, so ask what is best for your pet and what he or she thinks about a particular Internet site or retail store that carries the products he or she has recommended for your pet.

Watch for Red Flags-Here are five important questions to consider:

***Are the prices drastically lower than what your veterinarian or even other Web sites charge? This could indicate a counterfeit or diverted product that may not be what it says OR that contains contaminants OR incorrect amounts of active ingredients OR has been stored improperly with cold, heat or humidity damage.**

***Did the Internet sites send or did a retailer sell you products that look different from what you normally give your pet or that you didn't even order?**

***Is the Internet site licensed by the State Board of Pharmacy where the business is based?**

***Is the Internet site based outside of the United States? These sites do not have to meet strict safety guidelines in the manufacture of products nor in the procurement of the proper raw materials to make the medications and products to the standard the FDA requires and your pet deserves?**

***Does the Internet site only allow contact through e-mail, without providing a physical address, telephone or fax number or other contact information?**

Always Check for Site or store Accreditation-While accreditation is critical, do not let this be the only criteria that you check, as it often is manipulated by large, unscrupulous businesses that strictly have profit-not your pet's best interest-at heart.

Report Problems and Suspicious Online Pet Pharmacies & Retailers that are Selling Pet Medications-Report anything that seems shady online by calling the FDA's Center for Vet Medicine at 1-800-FDA-VETS. Or you can report issues online at www.fda.gov/AnimalVeterinary/SafetyHealth/ReportaProblem/uc

m.055305.htm OR

www.fda.gov/Safety/ReportaProblem/ucm059315.htm OR

www.nabp.net/.

Educate Yourself about Online Pharmacies-"An informed consumer is an empowered consumer." You can find more information at the Center for Veterinary Medicine (CVM) Web site:www.fda.gov/AnimalVeterinary, or call the CVM at 1-240-276-9300.

Remember that neither the drug manufacturer nor your veterinarian will stand behind the drug maker's guarantee if you purchase the product from an unauthorized seller such as an online pharmacy or discount retailer. The guarantees are impressive, because the drug makers know how effective their products are. They also give substantial discounts in the form of extra doses of product and rebate checks mailed to the customers that make their cost often less than what is advertised by the unauthorized retailers and online pet pharmacies.

The drug manufacturers go to great lengths to insure that your pet gets the highest quality medications for their health needs. In fact, they recently have won a number of court cases against major retailers in the United States for bringing in products from China and India and falsely advertising them as being equivalent to the high-quality name brands.

I believe that your veterinarian is the best and most reliable source for any prescription medications your pet may need because your veterinarian:

***Physically examines your pet and knows its medical and treatment history**

- *Knows which medicines are safest for your pet**
- *Educates you about potential side effects your pet's medicines may cause**
- *Shows you how to properly administer and use prescribed medicines.**
- *Stores prescription medicines in the clinic according to label directions.**
- *Uses authentic and current, unexpired medications.**

The best advice I can give is to have an open and honest discussion with your veterinarian regarding any questions or cost concerns you may have to prevent any misunderstandings. Also, become educated so you, along with your veterinarian, can make the right choices to do what is best for your pet.