



Online Pet Pharmacies – Saving Money or Risk to Your Pets?

Their ads promise to save you lots of money and even “a stressful trip to the veterinarian”. You are encouraged by slick video and professional announcers to purchase flea medications, pain relief drugs and even heartworm prevention all from the comfort of your living room and laptop computer. But, are online pet pharmacies really the best option for you or are there hidden dangers?

With record numbers of families enjoying the benefits of pet ownership and online shopping, it should come as no surprise that the amount of money spent on our pets is huge. Experts are forecasting that pet owners will spend more than \$50 billion dollars annually. A significant percentage of those expenses include veterinary care and prescription medications. So, is it any wonder that buying your prescription medications online may also look like a good deal?

At first glance, online pet pharmacies would seem to be a great option. The promise of lower prices and having the medication shipped to your door is a big selling point for busy, budget conscious people. But, there are some pitfalls when relying on Internet based sources for your pet’s medication needs.

First, they all say you can "save a trip to the vet". Unfortunately, this is only partially true. In order to prescribe and dispense medication to your pet, most states require that there is a valid veterinarian-client-pet relationship or VCPR. This is usually defined as a veterinarian having examined your pet within the last 12 months. If the VCPR does not exist, medication cannot be dispensed.

Some websites will offer to sell the drugs without a prescription. This is not only illegal but not in the best interest of your pet! Websites that sell without needing prescriptions are most often based outside of North America, where pharmacy and drug laws may not be as strict.

The requirement for this professional relationship insures that you and your veterinarian have good, up to date facts about your pet’s health. Plus the medical records and history for your pet are all in one place. The veterinary staff also knows your whole pet family and can help prevent problems when there are multiple species present in the household.

Since pets are unique individuals, some may have unexpected reactions to certain drugs and some medications can even be deadly if given incorrectly. Others may need a special formulation for ease of administration. The online pharmacies will not know this information and this could be a problem if your pet is on several medications or has secondary conditions.

If a life-threatening emergency happens with a medication, your veterinarian is only a phone call away. Some online pharmacies only allow contact through email and this will not help you if your pet needs assistance immediately!

Finally, despite many good businesses online, there will always be a few who are looking for a quick buck at your expense. Avoid sites that offer dramatically lower prices than competing sites or your veterinarian. Likewise, if you have ordered medication online, check the drug to make sure it looks similar to what you have given before. If it looks different in any way, do not give it to your pet.

The FDA is so concerned about this, it is now warning pet owners to be aware of shady online companies. And, the National Board of Pharmacies has instituted the Veterinary Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites program (Vet-VIPPS) to help you find properly licensed and compliant online pet pharmacies. Only twelve companies so far have earned the right to display the Vet-VIPPS seal of approval.

Check with your veterinarian about online pharmacies. Many veterinary hospitals now offer their very own store on their websites. You can order your pet's medications conveniently from home at a competitive price, get home delivery and you know that the source is reputable. In addition, you will know with whom you are talking to in case of any problems or concerns. Honest and open communication with your veterinarian about cost concerns will prevent misunderstandings about money and help you do what's best for your pet.

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