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Online Pharmacies: Are They Created Equal?

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NOVEMBER / DECEMBER 2018 | PEER REVIEWED | WEB-EXCLUSIVE

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Online pharmacies are a dime a dozen and a quick internet search will

return many options. Well-meaning veterinary clients sometimes turn to the internet to find less expensive medications for their pet; however, although it is understandable that clients want to save money, it is important that patient care is not sacrificed with the use of poor quality medications. Most online pharmacies do provide clients with less expensive options, increased medication variety, and convenience, but some may provide medications that are counterfeit, expired, contaminated, or otherwise substandard.

The veterinarian and other practice team members are well-placed to help clients select the best pharmacy for their pet's needs. However, how does the team deduce which online options are valid medication sources and which should be avoided?

Domain Name

The National Association of Boards of Pharmacy (NABP) works to help consumers and prescribers identify legitimate online pharmacies and offers programs that promote safe pharmacy practices. These programs, previously known as Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites (VIPPS) and Veterinary-Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites (Vet-VIPPS), continue to operate but have transitioned into .pharmacy domain-verified websites. A logo indicating VIPPS status is easy for a nonlegitimate pharmacy to duplicate, but websites with a .pharmacy domain name cannot be duplicated.

NABP Approval

An online pharmacy must submit an application to NABP and receive its approval to obtain the .pharmacy domain name. NABP reviews the online pharmacy website prior to approval and then annually to verify compliance with the .pharmacy standards. This program is used to verify both human and veterinary pharmacies.¹ (See **Resources**.)

At the end of 2017, NABP had reviewed 11 749 online pharmacies and found that 95.7% were out of compliance with its patient safety and practice standards and/or federal and state laws. The most common reasons sites were found to be noncompliant were:

- ▶ Not requiring a valid prescription (89%)
- ▶ Affiliation with rogue drug outlets (86%)
- ▶ Undisclosed location (63%)

- ▶ Issuing prescriptions based only on online questionnaires and consultations (56%)

- ▶ Offering foreign or non-FDA-approved medications (52%).²

The Center for Safe Internet Pharmacies reported that approximately 20 illegal pharmacies are added to the internet each day.³

Beware of Counterfeits

Counterfeit medications (ie, medications that look almost identical to approved drugs but contain little or no active ingredients and may contain harmful ingredients) are a major concern with online pharmacies.

The World Health Organization estimated that 50% of medications purchased from online sites that do not provide a physical address and 1% of all medications sold in developed countries are counterfeit.⁴ Buying from legitimate, regulated, online pharmacies decreases the risk of receiving counterfeit medications.

Check on Canada

Despite these statistics, many people believe that Canadian pharmacies are well-regulated and safe places to obtain discounted medications. Licensed Canadian pharmacies are regulated by Health Canada.

However, the FDA prohibits non-US pharmacies from shipping medications into the United States. Not all online pharmacies that appear to be Canadian are actually based in Canada and some pharmacies present themselves as Canadian to gain customers' trust. Also, even if a company is located in Canada, it may not be regulated by Health Canada if it is selling drugs only to people outside Canada.⁵

The Takeaway

When evaluating an online pharmacy as a potential medication source, these 5 requirements must be met:

- ▶ The pharmacy has a pharmacist or veterinarian available to answer questions
- ▶ The pharmacy is licensed in every state where medications will be shipped; the state(s) the veterinarian is licensed in is not important
- ▶ A valid prescription is required for all prescription medications
- ▶ The pharmacy has a physical address and valid phone number in the U.S.

- ▶ The web address includes .pharmacy and the pharmacy is not on NABP's "Not Recommended" list (see **Resources**)

Conclusion

Online pharmacies may provide clients with less expensive options, increased medication variety, and convenience. However, as the number of these pharmacies continues to grow, it is important that both the veterinary team and clients are educated on how to recognize pharmacies that provide regulated, authentic medications versus those that may provide substandard medications that will hurt, not help, their clients' pets.

When prescribing medications that will be obtained from an online pharmacy, make sure the pharmacy is reputable and that clients are aware how important it is to select a high-quality online pharmacy.

RESOURCES

- ▶ Find a safe site. NABP. [safe.pharmacy/buying-safely](https://www.nabp.pharmacy/buying-safely)
- ▶ Program eligibility and policies. NABP. [nabp.pharmacy/programs/dotpharmacy/standards](https://www.nabp.pharmacy/programs/dotpharmacy/standards)
- ▶ Not recommended sites. NABP. <https://www.safe.pharmacy/not-recommended-sites>
- ▶ BeSafeRx: know your online pharmacy. FDA. [fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/BuyingMedicinesOvertheInternet/BeSafeRxKnowYourOnlinePharmacy/default.htm](https://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/BuyingMedicinesOvertheInternet/BeSafeRxKnowYourOnlinePharmacy/default.htm)

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4. The Counterfeiting Superhighway. European Alliance for Access to Safe Medicines. Published 2008. Accessed September 2018.
5. Imported Drugs Raise Safety Concerns. U.S. Food and Drug Administration. <https://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/ucm143561.htm>. Published March 1, 2018. Accessed September 2018.

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For global readers, a calculator to convert laboratory values, dosages, and other measurements to SI units [can be found here](#).

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