

Dr. Mike Paul, DVM

Mike has more than 35 years of experience in companion animal veterinary practice and is a valued member of IDEXX's Pet Health Network team since 2013.

Ten years ago, if you were in the market for school supplies or small electronics, you probably drove to the nearest Staples or Radio Shack. If you were looking for pet supplies, from pet toys and beds to foods and flea control, you went to your veterinarian or more recently to a super store.

Today, information availability has allowed pet owners to research pet needs, pet treatments, product prices, brand names and even the color of the box. Increasingly, pet owners are requesting prescriptions for their pets just as we do for our family. These prescriptions can be filled by the veterinarian or often at a human pharmacy.

[Editor's Note: Never use human drugs for your pet, unless your veterinarian has specifically prescribed them. [Click here for more.](#)]

Alternatively, there are online and compounding pharmacies available. While online pharmacies are sometimes supervised by boards of pharmacy, they often self regulate. It can occur that these online sources of pet and human drugs can be mishandled, adulterated or even counterfeit.

Online pet pharmacies on the rise

Many pet parents are seeking lower prices for medications needed by their pets through the use of online pet pharmacies. The advantage to the consumer has been reduced pricing and the convenience of home delivery, rather than having to visit a veterinarian's office to fill or refill prescriptions. The disadvantages, which are often unapparent or simply overlooked, include the risk of these online medications being counterfeit, expired or nearing their expiration date and potentially being improperly stored (e.g., too hot or too cold), damaging the drug and reducing the effectiveness and even the safety.

"These days, buying prescription drugs from the

Internet is easy," says the [National Association of Boards of Pharmacy website](#), "but finding a safe source for those medicines is not." E-commerce has been experiencing an unparalleled expansion for the last decade and the internet has become a major sales channel.

While traveling in China some years ago I was introduced to a USDA-affiliated veterinarian who showed me four identical vials of an antibiotic in wide use here in the U.S. They looked the exact same, down to the registration mark on the package insert. One vial contained product as manufactured in the United States, one vial contained 25% of the purported active ingredient, another contained just enough to impart a bitter flavor and one contained little more than milky water. Visually, texturally, and based on the accuracy of the label they were all indistinguishable from the product in my pharmacy.

Another time, I was on a flight from Miami and took something to help me get to sleep. The man next to me asked what I took and said in response, "Oh we can make those for you cheaper. We can make any product in identical packaging and make it available for 10% of the U.S. cost."

This gentleman was from India and showed me dozens of tablets labeled for the U.S. and packaged in blister packs identical to those obtained from U.S. pharmacies. It was frightening. The packaging even said "Made in U.S.A." I defy anyone to identify counterfeit or adulterated drugs produced in these factories.

Why are there so many counterfeit drugs?

Why bother to counterfeit drugs? Money. For counterfeiters, the profits are staggering.

Counterfeiting can apply to both brand name and generic products. Counterfeit drugs may be contaminated, worthless (not help the condition or disease the medicine is intended to treat) or actually poisonous (cause dangerous side effects). They may even contain the wrong active ingredient or no active ingredient at all. These drugs are often packaged in phony packaging that looks legitimate. We all accept that the inexpensive Prada purses sold on the street corner are not really Prada so why do we so often overlook the possibility that cheaper drugs sold on the

'corners' of the internet might also be less than they appear?

The drugs are not always fake, but most reputable manufacturers will not (and currently cannot legally) sell their products to online pharmacies, according to animalmedicalcenter.com. For Veterinarians, on the other hand, it is not illegal to sell these drugs. [The Animal Medical Center of Southern California](#) says on their website, "It is not illegal for veterinarians to sell their supplies to these companies, however, it is violating their contracts with the veterinary pharmaceutical companies to sell their drugs to these online pharmacies. The veterinary pharmacies do their best to police the situation, but it is obviously difficult to determine which veterinarians are violating their contracts by diverting drugs and supplies."

How should you protect yourself?

These products are commonly advertised in the online pet drug marketplace. The safest way to make sure you're getting the medicine and medical products you need is to buy them only from a reputable source. You want to be sure that the chain of handling has been safe, correct and secure at each step of the manufacture and distribution process.

Human dispensing pharmacies are reputable sources of human products and can also safely fill your veterinarian's prescription. Online pharmacies may or may not be reputable. If you choose to buy online, be sure the websites are licensed by the [Board of Pharmacy](#) in your state.

The safest place to obtain pharmaceuticals is from your veterinarian. Your veterinarian is the only healthcare provider who is trained in the proper application and administration of animal products and is knowledgeable in side effects and interactions of drugs in animals.

If you have any questions or concerns, you should always visit or call your veterinarian -- they are your best resource to ensure the health and well-being of your pets.

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