

# Hazards of Veterinary Medicines



*Drugs prescribed for animals are sometimes misused. If taken by humans accidentally or intentionally, they can cause significant harm or death.*



## ■ Hazards of Human Use of Veterinary Medicines

- Some medicines used in veterinary practice have a high abuse potential.
- Veterinarians need to be vigilant about the ways in which they dispense medications and advise their patients' owners regarding how to store dangerous medicines and prevent accidental poisoning.<sup>1</sup>
- Although misuse of veterinary medicines does not appear to be a widespread problem, caution is advised when animals are prescribed drugs that have a high abuse potential.
- Emergency medicine practitioners might benefit from training to identify and treat people who have been exposed to potentially harmful or addictive veterinary medicines.

## ■ Veterinary Medicine Misuse

- More than 5,000 over-the-counter (OTC) medicines, prescription medicines, and vaccines are labeled for veterinary use.<sup>2</sup> Many can be lethal to humans.<sup>3</sup>
- Often, pet medicines are not stored or disposed of safely.<sup>4</sup>
- Emergency department physicians are unfamiliar with many veterinary medicines and hampered by a lack of knowledge about their effects and how best to manage patients exposed to them.<sup>2</sup>
- Veterinary drugs are misused for their effects, particularly among those working with animals who have access to these drugs.<sup>5,6</sup>
- Some veterinary drugs are mixed with illegal drugs, like heroin and stimulants.<sup>7</sup>
- Some people take veterinary medicines to treat human diseases, a particular risk among veterinary workers.<sup>8</sup> Reasons for this misuse include convenience, economic need, and mistrust of the medical profession.<sup>9</sup>

## ■ Who Is at Risk of Being Harmed by Veterinary Medicines?

Those most at risk are people who work with animals, including veterinarians, veterinary nurses, farmers (including fish farmers), farm workers, and the owners of companion animals.<sup>8</sup>

- Veterinarians and their staff have access to a large variety of mind-altering, potentially addictive drugs, including controlled as well as noncontrolled substances.<sup>10</sup>
- Many veterinary clinics have inadequate safeguards in place to prevent or detect the misuse of veterinary medicines.<sup>11</sup>



- Case studies report intentional overdoses of veterinary medicines in suicide attempts.<sup>3</sup> Veterinarians are at risk, as they have a higher suicide rate than the general population.<sup>5</sup> Many suffer from depression and stress.<sup>12</sup>

### ■ *Commonly Misused Animal Medicines*

- Most drugs misused by humans are those used in veterinary practice for anesthesia (e.g., ketamine),<sup>13</sup> pain relief (e.g., butorphanol (an opioid),<sup>14</sup> fentanyl patches, and other opioids), or sedation (e.g., barbiturates, benzodiazepines, and xylazine).<sup>7</sup>
- Many of these drugs are similar or identical to medicines used for humans that have significant abuse potential—but they may have different names, dosages, and formulations. Jumbo doses intended for horses are especially dangerous.
- Veterinary formulations are not tested for human safety or approved for human use.
- Medicines used to treat respiratory problems in animals, or to regulate their fertility, may be misused by bodybuilders and people trying to control their weight.<sup>2</sup>

### ■ *“Red Flags” that a Problem May Exist in a Veterinary Clinic<sup>15</sup>*

- Pages missing from the controlled substance manifest.
- “Lost” or missing bottles of controlled substances, especially if this occurs repeatedly.
- A doctor or technician wanting to log in certain pharmaceutical deliveries when it is not one of their usual clinic tasks.
- Refusal by management to initiate or upgrade a controlled substances log.
- Missing prescription pads.
- Associates or partners who hold veterinary distributor accounts with delivery addresses other than the veterinary practice location.

### ■ *Signs that a Client May Be Consuming Their Animal’s Medications<sup>1</sup>*

- Asking for higher doses of the medication, most often accompanied by complaints that their animal’s condition is getting worse, and it needs more of this drug.
- More frequent refills.
- Suggesting that the veterinarian prescribe a controlled substance.
- Signs of drug addiction.

### ■ *How Large a Problem Is the Misuse of Prescription Veterinary Medicines?*

- More information is needed regarding the extent of misuse of veterinary medicines. No large-scale study of veterinary substance misuse has been conducted in the United States.<sup>16</sup>
- Vet shopping for prescription veterinary medicines, however, does not appear to be widespread in the United States.<sup>17</sup> A barrier to shopping is the need to present an animal that has or has been trained to mimic appropriate symptoms.

### ■ *Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs (PMPs):*

- Most states allow veterinarians to register for the state’s PMP so they can check an animal owner’s prescription history if they are concerned about possible diversion.
- Some states require veterinarians to register with the PMP if they prescribe or dispense controlled medications, and may require prompt entry of prescribing data or, more commonly, of dispensing data in the PMP database.<sup>17</sup>
- PMPs have detected only a few cases of veterinary medicine shopping.<sup>17</sup>
- Mandatory PMPs protect against veterinarians becoming “pill mills,” dispensing drugs inappropriately to addicts or drug dealers.



## References

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