

Just what the doctor ordered



Claire Millington of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons investigates the sale and purchase of veterinary medicines

Did you know that there are currently 430 different cat medicines specifically licensed for use in the UK? Are you familiar with the differences between the flea medicines on sale in the supermarket and the ones that vets sell – or that you can buy from a pharmacist? And are you aware that it's illegal to try to buy certain veterinary medicines without a valid prescription? The rules for human medicines may be familiar; for your cat's medicines though, a slightly different system applies.

"Selling veterinary medicines in the UK is strictly regulated – and for good reason," explains Simon Hack, Head of Enforcement at the Veterinary Medicines Directorate. Simon and his team work with suppliers, trading standards and the police to make sure that animal medicines are bought and sold legally. "Not only are there environmental and food-safety concerns, but you need to know that you have the right product for your pet – and that it has been properly manufactured and stored so that it will work," says Simon.

Who can supply what, where and when?

Although their sales are carefully regulated, you do have some choice about where you can buy medicines. In an emergency, the fact that the right medicine is on hand at the veterinary surgery may outweigh any other consideration. However, for routine flea and worming – or a cat that needs longer-term medication – there are other options.

"Who can supply medicines and whether or not they need a prescription, depends on the type of animals they are used to treat and the ingredients in the medicine," explains Simon. "The majority of veterinary medicines do need to be prescribed by a vet; however, once you have the prescription, the medicine can legally be supplied by any vet or a pharmacist." Although there is no substitute for taking your cat to the vet if you think he is sick, there are some medicines

that can be supplied, without a prescription, by a vet, pharmacist or suitably qualified person, as Simon explains. "These are really limited to some tick and flea treatments though," he says. "There are also some basic medicines, such as the type of flea treatments for cats that you see in the supermarket, which can be sold by anyone."

For some ailments, there may not be a medicine licensed for cats, so your vet may decide that it would be appropriate to treat your pet with a medicine licensed for a different condition, or even a different animal species. If your vet considers this to be the case, you will be asked to sign a consent form and your vet should give you a clear indication of any potential side effects.

However, don't use medicines you may have for different animals on your cat unless you've discussed this with your vet – some medicines that are fine for dogs and humans, for example, are poisonous and even lethal to cats.

How do you know if a medicine needs a prescription? "Ask any vet, listed or registered veterinary nurse, or pharmacist," suggests Simon. "If you are still not sure, you can also look up the medicine directly on the VMD website."*

So, if the medicine needs a vet's prescription, do you have to take your cat to the vet first? "Only vets should diagnose what is wrong with animals," explains Gordon Hockey, Head of the Professional Conduct Department at the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). "To be able to prescribe most medicines for an animal, a vet needs to see the animal so that they can make a clinical diagnosis. If a repeat prescription is necessary, the vet may need to see the animal again."

Veterinary fees

Veterinary fees are largely unregulated as, except for charity clinics, veterinary practices are businesses. Competition between practices is encouraged as it is in the interests of clients and their animals. "Ask your vet about fees in advance," says Gordon. "If you have concerns, you can try to resolve them with your vet. If you think that the charges are excessively high or were not fully explained, you can also contact the RCVS and consider making a complaint."

The RCVS produces the *Guide to Professional Conduct*, a set of guidelines for veterinary surgeons that include both charging for prescriptions and communicating prices to clients. Although vets can charge for both consultations and writing prescriptions, they should not charge you more for the prescription if you buy the medicines elsewhere. Vets should also display a list of the ten most-commonly prescribed medicines at the practice and their prices.

If you think that you are being asked to pay too much for a prescription or medicine, discuss this with your vet. You can ask to have different medicines put on one prescription, or whether it is possible to have a repeat prescription – although the vet may need to see your cat again before prescribing further medication or indeed if there are any alternative treatments. Please don't ask your vet to put medicines for different pets on the same prescription though – this is not allowed.

When buying prescription medicines, you have a choice between veterinary practices, pharmacies or websites. Comparing prices may be easy; however there are benefits and drawbacks to the different options.

If you buy from a veterinary practice or pharmacy, you are buying from a regulated supplier so can be sure that what you are getting has been properly manufactured and stored. Some medicines can stop working if, for example, air is allowed to get into them or they are used after the expiry date. If the practice is accredited under the Practice Standard Scheme, RCVS inspectors will have checked how medicines are stored. For more information see www.rcvs.org.uk/practicestandards. Buying from a veterinary practice also means you are buying from qualified professionals who have the experience and who can advise on other health issues.

Double check

There are a number of UK websites, some of which are linked to veterinary practices and pharmacies, which sell veterinary medicines. If the website says it is linked to a vet, you could check with the RCVS via www.findavet.org.uk or on 020 7222 2001 that the practice is genuine. The Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain (RPSGB) runs a voluntary scheme that checks and accredits pharmacy websites which are then identified by a logo. Not all online pharmacies are in

the scheme, so if there is no logo, you can check with the RPSGB whether a pharmacy is real. When you buy online, be very wary of any site that will sell you prescription-only veterinary medicines without seeing a prescription. If an online business is happy to do this, don't trust them – and consider letting the VMD know. If you are buying a medicine which can only be supplied by a vet, pharmacist or suitably qualified person, you should be asked questions to make sure that what they are selling to you is correct. Similarly, if you buy medicines in the supermarket, make sure that you read the product information or label carefully before treating your pet – giving a cat medication intended for dogs, for example, can be fatal.

Finally, if you are thinking of ordering medicine from an overseas website, don't; even if the country is within the European Union this counts as importing medicines and is illegal. "We need to make sure that the medicines you buy are safe and effective," says Simon. "It can be inconvenient for a pet owner, however, the rules really are there to make sure that the medicines on sale are safe for your cat and yourself and that they work." And remember, if you think your cat is sick, always call the vet. ●

Useful veterinary medicines information

National Office of Animal Health

www.noahcompendium.co.uk

www.pethealthinfo.org.uk

Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons

www.rcvs.org.uk

*Veterinary Medicines Directorate

www.vmd.gov.uk

Beyond the jargon

If you look up veterinary medicines on the VMD or the National Office of Animal Health websites, you will see they are each assigned to a legal category. The ones that relate to medicines for cats are:

The abbreviation	What it stands for	What it means to you
POM-V	Prescription-only medicine – veterinary surgeon	The medicine needs a prescription from a veterinary surgeon. If you have a prescription, you can buy the medicine from a vet or a pharmacist
POM-VPS	Prescription-only medicine – veterinary surgeon, pharmacist or suitably qualified person	This medicine needs a veterinary prescription, which can be obtained from a veterinary surgeon, pharmacist or suitably-qualified person. If you have a prescription, you can buy the medicine from any one of these categories of individual. A suitably qualified person (SQP) is someone who has taken a qualification and is registered as an SQP
NFA-VPS	Non-food animal – veterinary, pharmacist or suitably qualified person	This medicine does not need a prescription. However you can only buy it from a vet, a pharmacist or an SQP. You may find these in pet shops
AVM-GSL	Authorised veterinary medicine – general sales list	This medicine can be sold without prescription by anyone. The flea medicines in the supermarkets are in this category. You need to take extra care reading the labels on these – treating a cat with flea treatment intended for a dog, for example, can be fatal