

# PREVENTING SUBSTANCE MISUSE IN VETERINARY PRACTICE



Veterinary professionals, like other healthcare providers, have privileged access to controlled drugs. This puts veterinary professionals who may struggle with substance use disorder at higher risk. Knowing how to prevent substance misuse within a veterinary clinic and what to do if misuse is suspected are the first steps toward avoiding tragic health outcomes for vulnerable colleagues. Learn to recognize the signs of substance misuse in veterinary practice and respond to concerns promptly.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PREVENTING SUBSTANCE MISUSE WITHIN VETERINARY CLINICS

- Take regular inventory of controlled drugs.
- Assign drug ordering and inventory tasks to different employees.
- Maintain accurate dispensing records.
- Follow DEA rules for disposal of expired controlled drugs: render them “non-retrievable” in the presence of two witnesses and document on DEA Form 41.
- Keep controlled drugs locked away and keep keys and access codes secure.
- Restrict access to controlled drugs to a few authorized individuals.
- Require two employees to fill controlled drug prescriptions.
- Make a policy that veterinarians do not prescribe controlled drugs for their own pets – ask a colleague to do it.
- Use a security camera.
- Treat gabapentin as a controlled drug.
- If you suspect that someone is selling prescription pads or controlled substances from inventory, inform practice management and call law enforcement.

## RECOGNIZE SIGNS OF SUBSTANCE MISUSE

### In the Clinic:

- Irregularities in drug ordering, logging, or inventory.
- Decreased effectiveness of injectable controlled drugs, suggesting possible substitution or dilution.

### Among Staff:

- Isolation from co-workers.
- Extreme mood swings or irritability.
- Erratic behavior.
- Overall change in disposition.
- Showing up late for work or missing shifts.
- Spending unnecessary time near the controlled drugs.
- Becoming overbearing or defensive when asked about controlled drugs.
- Undue expertise in pain management.

These behaviors are not specific to substance use disorder. If you notice unusual behaviors in someone, talk with them directly, in private, about your concerns.

**Learn more** about treatment and support resources available to employees and their family members by contacting the MVMA Wellness and Peer Assistance Committee: (651) 645-7533.

Colleagues may make a report to the Minnesota Health Professionals Services Program: (651) 642-0487 or the Minnesota Board of Veterinary Medicine.

Employers who suspect a veterinarian is misusing controlled drugs are required to report it to the Minnesota Board of Veterinary Medicine: (651) 201-2844.

For immediate risk, contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: (800) 273-8255.

# MINNESOTA VETERINARIANS HAVE A ROLE IN ADDRESSING THE OPIOID CRISIS



As prescribers of controlled drugs, veterinarians can help prevent human substance misuse as well as deaths due to prescription drug overdose by practicing controlled drug stewardship and by learning to recognize clients who might be misusing drugs meant for their pets. Drug diversion occurs when prescription drugs are channeled away from their intended recipient for personal use or sale. Veterinary clients who go from clinic to clinic using false pretenses to access controlled drugs are known as “vet shoppers”.

## PRACTICE CONTROLLED DRUG STEWARDSHIP

- Consider alternatives to opioids when managing patient pain and anxiety.
- Dispense controlled drugs in small quantities for limited duration.
- Follow DEA regulations regarding controlled substance prescription refills:
  - Schedule II – cannot refill
  - Schedule III & IV – may refill up to five times in six months.
  - Schedule V – may refill as authorized by prescriber.
- Require photo ID before dispensing controlled drugs and keep a copy.
- Train staff to flag the record and notify management when vet shopping is suspected
- Enroll in the MVMA Veterinary Prescription Monitoring Program (VetPMP), which tracks controlled drug prescriptions written for animal patients.
- Consider sending prescriptions for controlled drugs to a human pharmacy to ensure that the client's information will be entered into the human PMP.
- Apply drug stewardship practices uniformly with all clients, as clients of any background may be affected by the opioid crisis.
- Educate clients about keeping medications secure at home.
- Direct clients to a drop-box location at a pharmacy or police station for safe disposal of unused medications.

## COMMON BEHAVIORS OF “VET SHOPPERS”

- Presenting a patient with injuries and an incongruous or incomplete history.
- Presenting different pets with similar injuries.
- Unwilling to provide previous medical records.
- Reporting clinical signs that do not match physical exam findings.
- Claiming medications were lost, stolen, or left behind during travel.
- Specifically requesting controlled drugs.
- Requesting frequent refills and refusing to return for recheck appointments.
- Requesting controlled medication for “thunderstorm anxiety” at a time of year when thunderstorms are unlikely to occur.
- Becoming hostile when controlled drugs are refused.

### NOTE:

If you have evidence that a client is diverting drugs, notify local law enforcement as soon as possible, and provide police with a list of local veterinary clinics to aid their investigation.

For more information on controlled substances schedules and DEA requirements visit <https://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov>