

Headline: Three reasons not to take animal medicine

Blurb: The use of ivermectin to treat COVID-19 remains unproven with little to no evidence that it works. Although the medication can now be legally accessed with a doctor's supervision, some people continue to use the animal version of the drug. Here's why that's dangerous.

Byline: Aisha Abdool Karim, Joan van Dyk, Dylan Bush

Animal ivermectin sales are double what they were before the pandemic, says Afrivet. And it's not because South African livestock is sicker than usual.

Afrivet is a South African company that supplies animal health products like ivermectin to farmers and vets.

The antiparasitic medicine is used to treat worm infections in people and animals.

It also treats some skin conditions but is not registered – or proven – to treat or prevent COVID-19.

People can now access human ivermectin legally from their GP, but many people are using the animal formulation which is far cheaper.

Here's why it's dangerous to take animal medicine.

1. There is a risk of overdosing or liver damage

Animal ivermectin contains much higher concentrations of the drug to treat larger animals such as cows or horses.

The human body cannot tolerate such a large dose of any medication.

People who take animal ivermectin run the risk of damaging their liver or overdosing on the drug.

Ivermectin-related calls to [US poison control centres](#) have increased five-fold since August 2020.

Some of those calls resulted in people being hospitalised for treatment.

South Africa's medicines regulator, Sahpra, hasn't received reports of overdoses, but reports of liver damage as a result of ivermectin have increased.

2. You can't know for sure what's inside the medication

Medications for animals have to meet different standards than those for people.

In short, the rules are not as strict as for human medicine.

Not all ivermectin is created equal.

Each ivermectin product has its own recipe and its own mix of ingredients.

Human tablets include harmless powders that are safe for human consumption.

Additional ingredients could be put into the liquid animal formulation that may not be safe for humans.

3. There's no evidence to support the use of human ivermectin — let alone the animal version

There was [no good research and no evidence](#) that ivermectin worked to treat or prevent COVID in 2020 when people first started using the drug.

Nearly a year on, there's more ivermectin research around, but whether it works or not remains blurry.

[A review of 14 ivermectin studies published in July](#), found that the medicine had “little to no effect” compared to a placebo.

There is no data to support the use of ivermectin for prevention or as a treatment either at home or in a hospital.

There's no way to know for sure how many South Africans are taking the animal form of ivermectin.

South Africa's medical regulator doesn't have a system to track the misuse of the animal drug.

The department of agriculture is also not tracking abuse of the medicine.

This story was produced by the [Bhekisisa Centre for Health Journalism](#). Sign up for the [newsletter](#).