

What You Need to Know About Vaccinations

By Dr. Jean Hofve, Veterinarian Advisor

You probably get a postcard or email from your veterinarian at least once a year recommending an annual examination, and one or more vaccines. While it is important to have your pet seen by a vet regularly, many commonly used vaccines are unnecessary, and possibly harmful.

Vaccinations can help prevent serious illnesses, but they stress the immune system, can cause serious adverse reactions, and may contribute to long-term chronic diseases. The decision about vaccinations depends on your pet's individual lifestyle, risks, and needs—and it is always *your* decision, not your vet's.

For all pets, but especially puppies and kittens, try not to get multiple vaccines at the same time. Schedule vaccinations at least three weeks apart if, possible. And NEVER vaccinate a sick animal, or one with chronic health problems such as asthma, allergies, diabetes, autoimmune disease, thyroid disease, Irritable Bowel Disease (IBD), recurrent infections (indicating an impaired immune system), kidney disease, or cancer.

What is vaccination?

While the terms "inoculation," "vaccination," and "immunization" are sometimes used interchangeably, they are all different processes. Inoculation is simply the introduction of an organism; the term includes vaccination, but also such benign processes as adding bacteria to milk to make yogurt. Vaccination is the purposeful introduction of a disease-causing organism in order to produce immunity; most commonly by injection.

Immunization is the goal of vaccination, but not all animals will respond as intended. Such individuals may have a genetic defect, or have another condition that inhibits the immune response; or they may be on immune-suppressing drugs. Those non-responders have been vaccinated, but are not immunized.

The purpose of a vaccine is to stimulate the body to produce antibodies (germ-fighting proteins made by specialized white blood cells) and "memory" cells, so that if the animal ever encounters that particular disease again, his system will be primed and ready to defend against it. It turns out that many vaccines are so good at this that they don't need to be boosted every year—if at all. And some are so poor at it that using them may not be worth the risk of potential adverse effects.

Which vaccines does my pet need?

Just a few vaccines are considered "core," or necessary for every dog and cat; they are typically given to animals starting around 8 weeks of age.

The most commonly recommended core vaccines for kittens are feline panleukopenia (distemper)/rhinotracheitis/calicivirus (often combined in one shot) and rabies (to be given at age 3 months or older). Rabies vaccination is required by law in most states, even for indoor cats. There is now a feline rabies vaccine (Purevax by Merial) that does not run the same risks of cancer as most "killed" vaccines. Request it from your vet, or find one that carries it. Purevax is an annual vaccine, while most killed rabies vaccines are approved for use every 3 years. Still, the risk of cancer is too high with all killed vaccines (including rabies, feline leukemia, and feline immunodeficiency virus or feline AIDS); try to avoid them.

For puppies, core vaccines include distemper/parvo/adenovirus/parainfluenza and rabies. Killed vaccines very rarely cause cancer in dogs (although there have been a few cases reported), so the killed rabies vaccine is fine; but be sure your vet uses one that is certified for 3 years.

If your companion's risk of exposure is small, you may wish to avoid non-core vaccines, such as FeLK (feline leukemia), FIP (feline infectious peritonitis), FIV (feline immunodeficiency virus), ringworm, Giardia, and rattlesnake venom. Coronavirus, Bordatella (kennel cough), and Chlamydia vaccines are not very effective. Leptospirosis and Lyme disease are common in some parts of the country; so discuss them with your veterinarian to determine whether your dog's risk is high enough to warrant vaccination. Even without vaccines, it is still essential for your veterinarian to give your animal companion a thorough wellness examination every year (make that every 6 months for chronically ill or elderly animals).

"Vaccinations can help prevent serious illnesses, but they stress the immune system, can cause serious adverse reactions, and may contribute to long-term chronic diseases."

Booster vaccinations

Multiple studies have shown that the vaccines for parvovirus, canine distemper, and feline panleukopenia provide extremely good, long-term protection from disease—8 to 10 years or more. This is true whether your pet received the puppy or kitten series (with the last vaccine given at or after 16 weeks of age), or for older animals after a single vaccine.

Rabies produces very good immunity as well, but because of the public safety risks of the disease, it's still necessary to follow the laws in your area.

As the problems associated with over-vaccination have become more widely known, veterinary schools and organizations have altered their vaccine recommendations. Most now advocate 3-year vaccine intervals instead of the traditional (but not science-based) annual schedule; but even that is probably excessive for most vaccines. The vast majority of adult pets do not need further vaccination for the diseases covered by puppy and kitten vaccines. Booster vaccines do not increase the animal's immunity, but they do increase the risk of adverse reactions.

Natural disease prevention

A healthy immune system is the best defense against disease, and that starts with good nutrition—without the right building blocks, the body can't hope to fight disease, or repair damage if an infection does strike. So start by feeding your pet a good natural diet, and enhance it with [Omega-3 fatty acids](#), [antioxidants](#), and other good [immune support supplements](#).

The bottom line

Vaccination is a medical procedure with risks and benefits. Ask your veterinarian about the purpose of every recommended vaccine. Ask specifically why your pet should receive it—based on current health status, lifestyle, history, and risk factors. Make sure you understand and agree that each vaccine is justified. Don't let anyone—including friends, neighbors, kennels, veterinarians, technicians, or Internet "experts"—bully you into complying with their outdated or inflexible ideas. And don't fall for the "money-saving" idea of vaccinating your pet at home with products bought online. Unlike your veterinarian, online sellers won't be there to support you if your pet suffers an adverse reaction.

As much as we all love animals, nobody cares about your pet as much as you do—so it's up to you to do the right thing!