



Vaccination Recommendations for Cats

What vaccines does my cat need? Does my cat need vaccinated? There are a lot of different answers depending on your cat's lifestyle. There are vaccines that are recommended for almost every cat, called core vaccines. There are other vaccines that are only recommended for some cats, called non-core vaccines. Finally, there are some special cat-specific vaccination concerns that deserve attention.

Core vaccines for cats include rabies, panleukopenia, herpes (also called feline viral rhinotracheitis), and calicivirus. They are all viral diseases.

- **Rabies** is a fatal, zoonotic (that means people can get it) neurologic disease of mammals. It is transmitted primarily from bites from infected animals.
- **Panleukopenia** is transmitted in feces and other secretions. It causes low white blood cell counts (infection fighting cells). Gastrointestinal disease and secondary infections are also common. It can be fatal.
- **Herpesvirus** in cats is a very common infection that causes upper respiratory signs and eye infections and ulcers. It is not the same as herpesvirus that people get, but cats that acquire it will be carriers forever. It is transmitted through facial secretions.
- **Calicivirus** causes upper respiratory signs and is very common also. It can cause painful oral inflammation and ulcerated oral surfaces. One rarer type of the virus does cause more generalized and severe illness. It is very contagious and can be spread through the air.

Non-core vaccines for cats are simple: There are many products that are out there, most are not recommended with the exception of Feline Leukemia Virus. FeLV is a retrovirus that has no known cure. It is transmitted through any secretion (like saliva) or excretion (like urine) that a cat can produce. It can make other diseases, like cancer and infections, more likely.

By looking at your cat's lifestyle, we can determine which vaccines are needed:

Your kind of cat	What they do	What vaccines they need
Social cat	Get groomed or boarded, go outside, have other cats come inside	Core vaccines plus FeLV
House cat	Stay in your house, all the time with no visiting cats	Core vaccines
Senior house cat	Same as house cat, just older (8 plus)	Rabies vaccine, discuss other core vaccines
House kitten	Same as house cat, just younger (less than one year)	Core vaccines, discuss FeLV

Now we know what vaccines are needed. When are they given?

- Rabies vaccine is first given once after 12 weeks of age. A booster vaccine is given one year after that, then once every three years.
- Panleukopenia, herpesvirus, and calicivirus vaccines are given together in the same syringe. This combination vaccine is often referred to as an “FVRCP” vaccine. It is given every 3 weeks, starting at 6 weeks of age, until at least 16 weeks of age. A booster vaccine is given one year later. Booster vaccines after that last for three years.
- FeLV vaccine is given twice (first vaccine with a booster in around 3 weeks) to older kittens and adults getting them for the first time. Boosters are given yearly after that.

What are the special concerns about vaccination in cats?

Almost thirty years ago, the connection was made that rarely a specific tumor type (sarcoma) was noticed in cats after injections. Depending on which study is being read, the incidence is between one in 1,000 and less than 1 in 10,000 of vaccinated cats. Cats have also developed this tumor type after skin punctures of many kinds: other types of injections, microchipping, and even bite wounds. While we haven’t figured out exactly why some cats develop this disease, it does seem to be related to inflammation associated with the injection.

So why vaccinate if we know this risk is there? The answer is that for many cats the risk from what we are preventing or treating is more than the risk from an injection site sarcoma. For example, the risk of any one cat getting FeLV is around 3% if they aren’t high risk. Vaccination is very effective in preventing this disease. The risk of tumor development following vaccination is at least 30 times less than the risk of getting FeLV if left unvaccinated.

Knowing there is a potential negative side effect, we do not recommend vaccinating uniformly in all cases. For example, this is why low risk cats don’t get the FeLV vaccine.

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