

Vaccinations for Your Pet

Vaccines help prevent many illnesses that affect pets. Vaccinating your pet has long been considered one of the easiest ways to help him live a long, healthy life. Not only are there different vaccines for different diseases, there are different types and combinations of vaccines. Vaccination is a procedure that has risks and benefits that must be weighed for every pet relative to his lifestyle and health. Your veterinarian can determine a vaccination regime that will provide the safest and best protection for your individual animal.

Understanding Vaccines

Vaccines help prepare the body's immune system to fight the invasion of disease-causing organisms. Vaccines contain antigens, which look like the disease-causing organism to the immune system but don't actually cause disease. When the vaccine is introduced to the body, the immune system is mildly stimulated. If a pet is ever exposed to the real disease, his immune system is now prepared to recognize and fight it off entirely or reduce the severity of the illness.

Vaccines are very important to managing the health of your pet. That said, not every pet needs to be vaccinated against every disease. It is very important to discuss with your veterinarian a vaccination protocol that's right for your pet. Factors that should be examined include age, medical history, environment, travel habits and lifestyle. Most vets highly recommend administering core vaccines to healthy pets.

Core Vaccines

Core vaccines are considered vital to all pets based on risk of exposure, severity of disease or transmissibility to humans.

For Dogs: Vaccines for canine parvovirus, distemper, canine hepatitis and rabies are considered core vaccines. Non-core vaccines are given depending on the dog's exposure risk. These include vaccines against *Bordetella bronchiseptica*, *Borrelia burgdorferi* and *Leptospira* bacteria.

Your veterinarian can determine what vaccines are best for your pet.

Determining the Timing and Frequency of Vaccinations

Your veterinarian can best determine a vaccination schedule for your pet. This will depend on the type of vaccine, your pet's age, medical history, environment and lifestyle.

For puppies: If his mother has a healthy immune system, a puppy will most likely receive antibodies in mother's milk while nursing. Puppies should receive a series of vaccinations starting at six to eight weeks of age. A veterinarian should administer a minimum of three vaccinations at three- to four-week intervals. The final dose should be administered at 16 weeks of age.

For adult dogs: Some adult dogs might receive certain vaccines annually, while other vaccines might be given every three years or longer.

Local Laws Regarding Mandatory Vaccines

Each state has its own laws governing the administration of the rabies vaccine. Some areas require yearly rabies vaccination. Other areas call for vaccines every three years. In almost all states, proof of rabies vaccination is mandatory.

Risks Associated with Vaccination

Immunizations should mildly stimulate the animal's immune system in order to create protection from specific infectious diseases. This stimulation can create mild symptoms, ranging from soreness at the injection site to fever and allergic reactions.

There are other, less common side effects like injection site tumors and immune disease associated with vaccination. That said, it is important to realize that vaccines have saved countless lives and play a vital role in the battle against infectious diseases. As with any medical procedure, there is a small chance of side effects. In most cases, the risks are much smaller than the risks of disease itself. But it is important to talk to your veterinarian about your pet's medical history before he is vaccinated.

Most pets show no ill effect from vaccination. Vaccine reactions may be minor and short-lived or require immediate care from a veterinarian. Clinical signs include:

- Fever
- Sluggishness
- Loss of appetite
- Facial swelling and/or hives
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Pain, swelling, redness, scabbing or hair loss around the injection site
- Lameness
- Collapse
- Difficulty breathing
- Seizures
- Lameness

It is best to schedule your pet's appointment so that you can monitor him for any side effects following administration of the vaccine. If you suspect your pet is having a reaction to a vaccine, call your veterinarian immediately.