



Vaccinating Your Dog

Vaccinations are a critical component of preventative care for your dog. Thanks to the development of vaccines, dogs have been protected from numerous disease threats. Some of these diseases can be passed from dogs to people - so canine vaccinations have protected human health as well.

Recently, studies have shown that vaccines protect dogs longer than previously believed and there have been improvements in the type of vaccines produced. There is increased awareness and concern that vaccination is not as harmless a procedure as once thought. These factors have led to a growing number of veterinarians who recommend reduced frequency of vaccinations while at the same time tailor vaccine recommendations to specific risk situations.

To assist veterinarians with making vaccine recommendations for dogs, the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) has issued a set of canine vaccine guidelines. Developed by a group of infectious disease experts, immunologists, researchers, and practicing veterinarians, these guidelines were first released in 2003 and revised with new information in 2006.

One of AAHA's key recommendations is that all dogs are different - and thus vaccine decisions should be made on an individual basis for each dog. Issues to consider include the age, breed, health status, environment, lifestyle, and travel habits of the dog. Health threats vary from the city to city and even in various sections of cities. You can work with your veterinarian to create an immunization program that best protects your dog based on risk and lifestyle factors.

What possible risks are associated with vaccination?

Vaccine reactions are infrequent. In general, most vaccine reactions and side effects (such as local pain and swelling) are self-limiting. Allergic reactions are less common, but if untreated can be fatal. Severe allergic reactions such as collapse, vomiting, swelling of the face, difficulty breathing or hives are uncommon, but if untreated can be fatal. These problems can arise shortly after vaccination up to a few hours later. Should such a reaction be noted contact us or an emergency facility immediately.

In a very small number of patients, vaccines can stimulate the patient's immune system against his or her own tissue, resulting in diseases that affect the blood, skin, joints or nervous system. Again, such reactions are infrequent but can be life threatening.

How do I know which vaccines my pet needs?

There are two general groups of vaccines to consider: core and non-core vaccines.

- Core vaccines are generally recommended for all dogs and protect against diseases that are more serious or potentially fatal. These diseases are found in all areas of North

America and are more easily transmitted than non-core diseases. The AAHA guidelines define the following as core vaccines: distemper, adenovirus, parvovirus and rabies.

- Non-core vaccines are those reserved for patients at specific risk for infection due to exposure or lifestyle. The AAHA guidelines classify kennel cough, Lyme disease and Leptospirosis vaccines within the non-core group.

How often should my dog be vaccinated?

Make sure that your dog completes the initial series of core vaccines administered at the puppy stage, as well as booster shots at one year of age. Following these one-year boosters, the AAHA Canine Vaccine Guidelines recommend that the distemper, adenovirus and parvovirus core vaccines be administered once every three years. State and municipalities govern how often rabies boosters are administered. Wisconsin allows three year vaccination.

Non-core vaccinations should be administered whenever the risk of the disease is significant enough to override risk of vaccination. For example, kennel cough vaccine may need to be administered as frequently as every six months to a dog repeatedly being kenneled or exposed to groups of dogs at grooming salons or dog shows.

Does this mean I only need to see my veterinarian every three years?

Regular wellness examinations - at least once or twice a year - are the most important preventative measure that you can provide for your dog. Vaccinations are just one component of the wellness visit. Regular wellness examinations are critical to determine the health status of your pet, including dental, skin, cardiac, weight and orthopedic status.

Remember, dogs age at a much faster rate than humans, so a once-yearly exam is similar to a human getting a physical every 5-7 years. They don't always show signs of early disease, and they can't easily communicate discomfort to us. During the wellness exam, your veterinarian has an opportunity to detect and prevent problems at an early stage.

Can my veterinarian conduct a test to see if my dog needs to be vaccinated?

Blood tests that measure protective antibody levels for diseases are called titers. In recent years titer tests for some diseases such as canine distemper and parvovirus have become more readily available and economical however, the validity of titer testing is controversial. Veterinarians may recommend using these titer tests in some cases to determine whether or not vaccinations are needed. We can provide you with more information on titer testing. Please ask your veterinarian if interested.

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