

# Does Your Pet Really Need All Those Vaccines?

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## The Holistic Approach to Vaccinations

Alternative ways to keep your pet healthy and immune



We love our pets and we want to do everything we can to keep them healthy. But are we doing too much? We've been hearing from a lot of readers who are curious about whether their pets really need to be getting vaccinations as often as they do, so we reached out to Barbara Royal, DVM, CVA, founder and owner of The Royal Treatment Veterinary Center in Chicago, for answers. Royal is a leader in holistic veterinary care, complementary medicine, and physical rehabilitation, and a pioneer in the melding of Western and Eastern veterinary medicine. While every veterinarian has his or her own opinion on the matter, we encourage you to start a dialogue with your vet if this is something *you're* interested in. How do we use minimal vaccines and medicines to achieve maximum immunity? The answer involves a holistic approach to health, good science, and common sense. Certain vaccines are required, recommended, or suggested by kennels, groomers, day care facilities, or dog parks, but always be sure you are choosing vaccines based on the health of your pet. To do that, you've got to get educated.

### All vaccines are not created equal

Vaccines are not benign. Injectable vaccines contain a modified disease agent in an underlying carrier. The intention is to create an immune reaction and a memory for a strong response to a particular disease entity. However, any time you bypass the body's outer immune mechanism and inject a substance directly into the blood, there are risks. Oral and nasal vaccines tend to be more benign than injectable ones, but all vaccines should be considered with caution.

Each vaccine carries a different risk of reactions. Not having had a reaction in the past is a good sign that your pet may handle the injection well, but it does not predict future issues. Symptoms include: itching, swelling, hair loss (often permanent) at the site, lethargy, fever, vomiting, diarrhea, allergies autoimmune diseases, seizures, carcinomas, collapse, and death. In cats there is a very serious condition that can develop called "vaccine associated sarcomas," aggressive cancers at the site where the vaccine was injected.

There are several vaccines I tend to avoid due to higher risks of reactions or because they aren't effective enough to justify the risk. It is your veterinarian's job to help you understand these medical judgments. Always be an advocate for your pet and ask your vet about the rationale and risks of any injection.

### What is required?

The rabies vaccination is required by law, and every state has its own rules. Most states allow a three-year vaccine, since the one-year vaccine actually lasts much longer than we initially thought. It has been scientifically proven that after the first vaccine (which protects for a year), a booster provides immunity for at least three years following. Most states currently follow the three-year guideline, but studies are being done now that may change the guidelines to five- or seven- year vaccines. Ask your vet to keep you informed about the law in your state.

The initial puppy/kitten series of combination vaccines—DHLPP for dogs, FVRCP for cats— also typically last longer than veterinarians were originally taught. In fact, after receiving the initial injection and one adult booster, immunity is very likely lifelong.

### **What to avoid**

I do not recommend giving multiple vaccine injections at the same time. Too many chemicals at once are hard on the immune system, increase the risk of reactions, and make it difficult to tell which vaccine caused a reaction if there is one. As such, pets should be given at least 10 days between vaccines.

I also do not recommend putting pesticides on your pet every month, and topical flea/tick medications fall into this category. These harsh chemicals are released into your pet's skin and absorbed into her body. Instead, I recommend using natural, essential oil repellants that can be safely sprayed on or used as topical monthly squeeze-ons for effective flea and tick prevention. Luckily, in Chicago, these are seasonal, since we get a break during the cold months.

Geography makes a difference for some other preventatives, too, such as heartworm. In the Midwest, heartworm medication only needs to be given after the start of mosquito season—starting in June and going through December. Interestingly, heartworm medication does not stop the initial microfilaria infection that occurs from a mosquito bite. It prevents heartworm disease by killing the tiny microfilaria before they become large worms in the heart. This happens 60 days or longer after the mosquito bite, so treating before exposure or when there are no mosquitos doesn't make sense.

### **Alternatives to vaccines**

Most businesses that ask for proof of vaccines are really looking for proof of immunity. A blood test, called a vaccine titer, proves that an animal still has immunity to a disease from a previous vaccine based on levels of chemicals found in the blood. If you can provide this, your companion animal can be spared excessive chemicals and unknown substances being injected on a regular basis.

These tests are usually done every three years, and are accepted by most animal facilities as complying with safety regulations. It is better to check for immunity than to constantly stress the immune system and risk reactions for no reason. A titer test may cost a bit more initially, but it will more than pay for itself in health benefits for your pet. (Editor's note: In Illinois, blood titer tests are not legally accepted as proof of immunity for the rabies vaccine.)

### **Talking to your vet**

As with all health related items, I encourage you to work with your vet to come up with the best plan. Here are some questions you can ask to get the conversation started:

- 1 Is this vaccine truly safe (very few life- threatening or serious reactions)?
- 2 Is this vaccine required by law?
- 3 Is the timing appropriate? (Is there still immunity? Is there a longer lasting vaccine? Should vaccines be separated or delayed?)
- 4 Is my pet healthy enough to mount an appropriate immune response?
- 5 Is there a reason not to give the vaccine (possible signs of illness, upcoming stress, etc.)?
- 6 Is there really a risk of this disease for this pet?
- 7 Is the disease serious enough to require protection via vaccine?
- 8 Is the vaccine well-tested and made by a responsible company?
- 9 Does the vaccine have mercury in it?

Based on your vet's answers, you should be able to make a well thought out decision about your pet's need for a particular vaccine.