

How frequently should I have my pet vaccinated?

A simple question? Not really. Most veterinarians will agree that vaccinations are the single most effective way to control some serious infectious diseases, and that dogs and cats should be vaccinated when young, starting at about two months of age, and that they should receive a series of inoculations three to four weeks apart. The exact number of doses required to develop good immunity depends on the precise age of the animal when the regimen is started, and the particular vaccine used. Certain diseases, such as rabies and kennel cough only require that one dose be given, but again this depends on the particular brand of vaccine used. After that it is a good idea to get a booster vaccination at about 16 months of age, or one year after the last puppy or kitten dose. Beyond that things are somewhat less clear and more controversial.

Historically veterinarians recommended an annual check-up and vaccination as a preventative health program. The truth is that nobody really knows the ideal frequency at which to vaccinate an animal to maintain immunity from these diseases. Antibody levels can be measured, but that does not give an accurate measure of how the animal would react to a real life challenge to the disease. Also, this involves collecting a blood sample, and is more expensive than simply giving a booster vaccination.

When vaccines are approved for use by the Bureau of Veterinary Drugs in Ottawa, manufacturers must demonstrate through clinical trials that the vaccines are safe and effective. Moreover they must demonstrate that they are effective for a particular period of time. Manufacturers have tended to get their product on the market as soon as they can—after demonstrating efficacy for one year's duration. They then label their product "Revaccinate annually". If you are a cynic, you will probably think that they would like to sell you a dose of their vaccine once a year. I won't argue with that point of view. Certain vaccines, such as some rabies vaccines have a three year demonstrated efficacy, and are labelled as such.

Vaccinations are somewhat like buying insurance; you really never know when you need them. What I like my clients to consider is the question: What are my pet's risk factors? Risk factors vary greatly between one animal and the next. A small breed dog whose entire universe consists of a fenced back yard and the living room couch has very different risk factors from the Labrador retriever which goes hunting in the fall, drinking

from streams, running through the bush and so on. The small dog may be at increased risk for certain diseases if it goes into grooming parlours regularly. Also, if that dog should be injured or fall ill and have to spend a few days at a veterinary hospital, the risk of exposure to certain infectious diseases, preventable by vaccination, has increased. A cat which is kept strictly indoors probably does not need to be vaccinated as frequently as one that goes out of doors and has territory overlapping that of other cats. The point is that exactly which diseases you want to have your pet vaccinated for, and how frequently you want to have them vaccinated depends on the animal's lifestyle. You should discuss your pet's risk factors and lifestyle with your veterinarian and come to your own conclusion and make your own decision after that discussion.

The flip side of the coin is the question: Is it harmful to my pet to have an annual vaccination? My personal opinion is that no, it is not, although individual animals may have adverse reactions. Also, the cost of vaccinations is not really that great when you compare it to some of the other costs associated with keeping a pet.

One of the things that clients sometimes don't hear when their veterinarian tells them that they may only need to vaccinate for certain diseases once every three years, is that it is still recommend to have an annual physical examination as part of a preventive health care program. Geriatric animals, or animals with already existing disease conditions may in fact need physical exams more frequently than that even.

In summary—learn about the risk factors for the various infectious diseases for which there are vaccines, consider your pet's lifestyle in light of those risk factors, discuss it all (pros, cons and costs) with your veterinarian during your pet's annual physical examination, and then you decide what you want for your pet.