

Canine Vaccine Recommendations

- Vaccines are an important weapon against infectious diseases.
- Over the years, the widespread use of vaccines has saved the lives of millions of dogs.
- Vaccines are safe and generally well tolerated by most dogs.
- Vaccine selection and scheduling should be an individualized choice that you and your veterinarian make together.

Companion animals today have the opportunity to live longer, healthier lives than ever before. One of the main reasons for this is the availability of vaccines that can protect pets from deadly viral and bacterial diseases. Over the past several decades, the widespread use of vaccines against canine distemper, parvovirus infection, rabies, and other diseases have saved the lives of millions of dogs and driven some of these diseases into relative obscurity. Unfortunately, these diseases still pose a significant threat to dogs that are unvaccinated; so, although vaccine programs have been highly successful, pet owners and veterinarians cannot afford to become complacent about the importance of keeping pets up-to-date on their vaccinations.

Why Does My Dog Need Vaccines?

Vaccines are one of our most important tools against infectious diseases. Some of these diseases, such as “kennel cough,” can be transmitted directly from dog to dog. If your dog is ever around other dogs, such as at a kennel, dog park, grooming salon, or day care facility, your dog is likely to be exposed to infectious diseases. Even dogs that look healthy may be sick, so keeping your dog’s vaccines up-to-date is a good way to protect your dog from illness.

Even if your dog doesn’t have contact with other dogs, some diseases can be transmitted indirectly. For example, parvovirus infection, which is potentially fatal, is spread through contact with feces from an infected dog. Even if your dog never has contact with a dog infected with parvovirus, your dog could

be exposed to the virus through contact with feces from an infected dog, such as in a park or on a beach. Lyme disease—a dangerous infection that is carried by ticks—is another disease that your dog can be exposed to without coming into contact with other dogs.

So, even dogs that spend most of their lives indoors or have very limited contact with other animals are not completely safe from exposure to infectious diseases.

How Do Vaccines Work?

Although there are many types of vaccines, they tend to work through a similar principle. Most vaccines contain a very small portion of the virus or bacterium that is the infectious agent. Some vaccines contain small quantities of the entire virus or bacterium, whereas others contain particles that are part of the

Vaccine selection and scheduling should be an individualized choice that you and your veterinarian make together.

infectious organism. When this material is introduced into the body in a vaccine, the body’s immune system responds through a series of steps that include making antibodies and other cells that will recognize the target organism later. When the vaccinated individual encounters the “real” organism later, the body recognizes the organism and reacts to protect the vaccinated individual from becoming sick.

Are Vaccines Safe?

All of the available vaccines have been thoroughly tested and found to be safe when administered as directed. Most dogs tolerate vaccines very well, although reactions can occur in some cases. Some dogs can seem a little “tired” after receiving vaccines.

Preventive Care

Notify your veterinarian if your dog develops hives, redness on the skin, breathing problems, facial swelling, or vomiting. You should also tell your veterinarian if your dog has ever had a problem after receiving a vaccine.

What Vaccines Does My Dog Need?

Many vaccines are available for dogs, but every dog does not need to receive every available vaccine. So how do you know what vaccines your dog should have? The American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) has developed a summary of vaccine recommendations to help veterinarians clarify how to best protect dogs through the use of vaccine programs. AAHA evaluated the available vaccines and categorized them to provide guidelines on how commonly they should be used. Vaccines are categorized as core, non-core, or not recommended. A core vaccine is one that all dogs should receive. The core vaccines for dogs are rabies, distemper, adenovirus-2, and parvovirus. Non-core vaccines are optional ones that dogs can benefit from based on their risk for exposure to the disease. Examples include the vaccines against Lyme disease and leptospirosis. Categorization of a vaccine as “not recommended” does not mean that the vaccine is bad or dangerous. This designation simply means that there is currently insufficient information to recommend the widespread use of the vaccine.

Because core vaccines are recommended for all dogs, your veterinarian will recommend keeping your dog's vaccines against distemper, parvovirus, adenovirus-2, and rabies up-to-date at all times. The decision regarding non-core vaccines should be made after you and your veterinarian have discussed the vaccines in question and whether your dog might benefit from receiving them. Factors to consider include your dog's lifestyle (how much time your dog spends outside), where you live, where you travel with your dog, and how often your dog has contact with other dogs. Bear in mind that vaccine recommendations can change: if your dog's lifestyle changes, your veterinarian may want

to discuss modifying the vaccine recommendations to ensure that your dog is well protected.

What Is the Recommended Schedule for Vaccines?

Puppies generally receive their first vaccines when they are around 6 to 8 weeks of age. Booster vaccines are generally given every 3 to 4 weeks until the puppy is 16 weeks of age. Your veterinarian can discuss with you which vaccines your puppy will receive at your “puppy checkup” visits. Vaccines are generally repeated a year later.

Although puppies are considered especially vulnerable to some diseases, it is also very important for adult dogs to be up-to-date on vaccines. Traditionally, many vaccines were repeated yearly, during regular annual checkup examinations. However, research has shown that some vaccines can protect dogs for longer than 1 year. In light of research findings, the AAHA guidelines note that some vaccines don't need to be repeated more often than every 3 years. The decision regarding how often your dog needs vaccine boosters depends on several factors, including your dog's overall health status and risk for exposure to the diseases in question. Your veterinarian may recommend annual boosters after considering your dog's lifestyle and disease exposure risk. The decision regarding how often to administer any vaccine (annually, every 3 years, or not at all) should be an individualized choice that you and your veterinarian make together.

Vaccination remains one of the most important services your veterinarian offers, and although vaccination is a routine procedure, it should not be taken for granted. It also allows a regular opportunity for your veterinarian to perform a physical examination, which is very important for keeping your dog healthy. Protecting patients is your veterinarian's primary goal, and developing an appropriate vaccine protocol for your pet is as important as any other area of medicine.