

Feline Vaccine Recommendations

- Vaccines are important for preventing infectious diseases.
- Over the years, the widespread use of vaccines has saved the lives of millions of cats.
- Vaccines are safe and generally well tolerated by most cats.
- 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 infectious diseases. Over the past several decades, the widespread use of vaccines against diseases like panleukopenia and rabies has saved the lives of millions of cats. Unfortunately, infectious diseases still pose a significant threat to cats 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 Cat Need Vaccines?

Vaccines are one of our most important tools against infectious diseases. Some of these diseases, such as rhinotracheitis, can be transmitted directly from cat to cat. If your cat goes outside or is ever around other cats, such as at a grooming salon or day-care facility, your cat may be exposed to infectious diseases. Even cats that appear healthy may be sick, so keeping your cat's vaccines up-to-date is a good way to protect your pet from illness.

Even if your cat doesn't have contact with other cats, some diseases can be transmitted indirectly. For example, panleukopenia infection is potentially fatal and is spread through contact with body fluids (mostly urine and feces) from an infected cat. Once a cat is infected with panleukopenia, it may shed virus in body fluids for a few days or up to 6 weeks.

Panleukopenia can live in the environment (such as on contaminated bedding, food bowls, litterboxes, and other items) for a very long time, so contact with contaminated objects can spread the infection to other cats. Additionally, if a pet owner is handling an infected cat, failure to change clothes and wash hands thoroughly with the correct disinfectant can expose other cats to the disease. So even if your cat never has direct contact with a cat infected with panleukopenia, exposure can occur in this way. Even completely indoor cats that have limited contact with other animals are not completely protected from 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

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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 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 modifying 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 for cats have been thoroughly tested and found to be safe when administered

as directed. Most cats tolerate vaccines very well, although reactions can occur in some cases. Some cats can seem a little “tired” after receiving vaccines. Notify your veterinarian if your cat develops breathing problems or vomiting after receiving a vaccine. You should also tell your veterinarian if your cat has ever had a problem in the past after receiving a vaccine.

Which Vaccines Does My Cat Need?

Many vaccines are available for cats, but every cat does not need to receive every available vaccine. So how do you know which vaccines your cat should have? The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) has developed a summary of vaccine recommendations to help veterinarians clarify how to best protect cats through the use of vaccine programs. AAFP 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 cats should receive. The core vaccines for cats are rabies, rhinotracheitis (feline herpesvirus-1), panleukopenia (feline distemper), and calicivirus. Non-core vaccines are optional ones that cats can benefit from based on their risk for exposure to the disease. Examples include the vaccines against feline leukemia virus and feline immunodeficiency virus (or feline AIDS). Categorization of a vaccine as “not recommended” does not mean that the vaccine is bad or dangerous. This designation simply means that widespread use of the vaccine is not currently recommended.

Because core vaccines are recommended for all cats, your veterinarian will recommend keeping your cat’s vaccines against rabies, rhinotracheitis, panleukopenia, and calicivirus 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 cat might benefit from receiving them. Factors to consider include your cat’s lifestyle (how much time your cat spends outside), where you live, where you travel with your cat, and how often your cat

has contact with other cats. Remember that vaccine recommendations can change: if your cat’s lifestyle changes, your veterinarian may want to discuss modifying the vaccine recommendations to ensure that your cat is well protected.

What Is the Recommended Schedule for Vaccines?

Kittens generally receive their first vaccines when they are around 6 to 8 weeks of age (depending on the vaccine and manufacturer’s recommendations). Booster vaccines are generally given 3 to 4 weeks later. Your veterinarian can discuss with you which vaccines your kitten will receive at your “kitten checkup” visits. Vaccines are generally repeated a year later.

Although kittens are considered especially vulnerable to some diseases, it is also very important for adult cats to be up-to-date on vaccines. Traditionally, many vaccines were repeated yearly, during regular checkup examinations. However, research has shown that some vaccines can protect cats for longer than 1 year. In light of research findings, the AAFP guidelines note that some vaccines can be given every 3 years. The decision regarding how often your cat needs vaccine boosters depends on several factors, including your cat’s overall health status and risk for exposure to the diseases in question. Your veterinarian may recommend annual boosters after considering your cat’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 cat 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.