

DOG VACCINES: YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Q: Why is there a need to vaccinate?

A: The current low incidence of diseases such as distemper is principally due to dog owners having their pets routinely vaccinated. Vaccination is necessary in order to provide protection against life threatening diseases such as distemper, hepatitis, parvovirus, parainfluenza and leptospirosis. Vaccination is the only proven method of protecting against these diseases. Apart from perhaps leptospirosis, there is no specific cure for them, and in all cases – including leptospirosis – treatment may not only be unsuccessful, but also extremely expensive.

Q: Why do boosters have to be given: people don't get them, so why do pets?

A: None of the above diseases have yet been eradicated, and cases of all these diseases are still reported. A dog is always at risk of potential exposure to one of them if it goes out or comes into contact with other dogs, or, in the case of leptospirosis, with wild rodents or the areas they frequent. Immunity is also neither lifelong, or of the same duration in every animal. Booster vaccinations are an effective way of 'topping up' a dogs' immunity, thereby minimising the risk of disease when challenged by natural infection. Annual boosters are given to 'top up' the dog's immunity against leptospirosis and parainfluenza, where as boosters against distemper, hepatitis and parovirus are given every third year. Some human vaccines are in fact boosted where there is an increased risk of exposure, for example vaccination against 'flu or polio.

Q: Why do vaccines cost so much?

A: What is being paid for is full professional consultation in addition to the cost of vaccination. When taking an animal to be vaccinated the vet will not only be administering one or more doses of vaccine, but will also perform a thorough health examination. Many vets will also use the opportunity to discuss other aspects of pet health care, such as worming, flea control, diet etc. Most vets will be only too happy to explain what you will be getting for your money.

Q: I have heard vaccines can cause side effects. Is this true?

A: Serious side effects following vaccinations are extremely rare. Although all veterinary vaccines undergo thorough, independent evaluation of their safety, efficacy and quality, it is impossible to guarantee that any product will be safe and effective in every individual case. It must be remembered, though, that the very small risk of a vaccine side effect is greatly outweighed by the benefit of protection against serious disease.

Q: Homeopathic vaccines – what about them?

A: The main concern most vets have about their use is that there is no proper independent evidence to show that they work in protecting dogs by preventing disease. Indeed, the few properly designed trials that have been carried out by using homeopathic nosodes have shown no evidence of protection. Without evidence of effectiveness, homeopathic nosodes may pose far greater risk to dogs by leaving them susceptible to disease.

Q: What are 'live' vaccines, and how are they used?

A: as the name suggests, these vaccines contain live strains, which have been specially modified to prevent them from causing disease, thereby ensuring safety for the vaccinated animals as well as unvaccinated 'in-contact' animals. Live vaccines give a rapid onset of protection, usually only requiring one dose for the primary course; they provide better stimulation of the immune system, and give longer lasting protection.

Q: Company literature says that only healthy dogs should be vaccinated; why is this, and what are the risks to an unhealthy dog?

A: To get the full benefit of a vaccine, it is important that the dog is healthy, which is why it is essential that your vet carries out a health examination before vaccinating your pet. When faced with an animal with long-term disease, such as heart disease or diabetes, most vets will advise that vaccination should be continued. There is no evidence that such animals fail to respond, or are at greater risk of problems.

Q: Do vaccines affect different breeds in different ways?

A: There are no breed-specific contra-indications for any of the vaccines currently on the market. Despite this, some breeders occasionally suggest that one or other of the live vaccine components affects their particular breed. When such reports are investigated, the information appears to be purely anecdotal and incapable of substantiation.

Q: Why do all dogs get the same vaccine dose, irrespective of size, or breed?

A: When we give drugs such as antibiotics or wormers, the effect depends on achieving a certain concentration of the active ingredient in the body of the animal, and, for this reason the larger the body mass, the greater the total amount needed to achieve a dose level of 'X' mg/kg. However, vaccination doesn't work like this, when we give a dose of vaccine what we are doing is giving a sufficient dose to stimulate the body's immune system to generate a protective immune response. The immune system in fact requires the same degree of stimulus irrespective of the body mass or breed, therefore we need to use *exactly the same* dose of vaccine for a Chihuahua as for a Great Dane!