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Vaccination – Are Booster Vaccines Necessary for Dogs

Primary vaccination is essential in order to prevent the once common puppy diseases that caused high levels of fatality from returning. However, recent research indicates that not all vaccines require yearly boosters.

There is no evidence that annual booster vaccination is anything but beneficial to the majority of pets. Published research has shown conclusively that omitting to re-inoculate against some of the major diseases can put your pet at risk. To establish whether boosters are necessary for your pet, blood tests to measure the amount of antibodies (antibody titers) are sometimes recommended. Unfortunately, these tests are often more expensive than revaccination and may be stressful to your dog.



In addition, a high serum antibody may not ensure disease protection if your pet becomes exposed to a virulent strain of disease.

Government regulatory bodies have strict guidelines for vaccines, and manufacturers must prove that a vaccine is safe and effective before it can be used in your pet. Through vigilance and high standards, the veterinary vaccines used today are the safest and most protective ever.

I would prefer my pet to have boosters only when necessary. Is this okay?

It is possible, but in order to determine when boosters are necessary, the level of immunity against any of the preventable diseases has to be established by individual blood tests for antibody titers. If a specific antibody titer is found to be low, your pet will require a booster vaccine. Currently, inoculation against a single disease may not be available, and it is likely to cost as much as a multivalent vaccine. From your pet's point of view, it is preferable to receive one injection against the common diseases rather than a series of single disease inoculations.



For patients that have low-risk lifestyles or whose owners want less frequent vaccination, your veterinarian may recommend giving certain "core" or essential viral vaccines to your dog on a three year schedule. It is important to note that this is an off-label use for some vaccines and may violate government regulations. You should discuss the pros and cons with your veterinarian before making a decision. Recent studies have demonstrated that some viral vaccines may convey at least three years' immunity. This is not the case with bacterial vaccines, which usually still require annual boosters.

Ultimately, how frequently your pet should be vaccinated is determined by your pet's lifestyle and relative risk. The issues are complex and often contentious. Ask your veterinarian about the type and schedule of vaccines that is appropriate for your pet.

Are there any other advantages of annual vaccination?

Not all vaccines confer protection for a year.

You and your veterinarian should decide which vaccinations your pet receives based on your pet's lifestyle, age and health status. If you routinely board your dog, or if she is exposed to other dogs on a regular basis, some vaccines, especially those for infectious bacterial diseases such as kennel cough, may be necessary annually.

Your veterinarian performs an annual health examination prior to administration of a vaccine injection. You are asked specific questions about your dog's health status, and the veterinarian checks your dog's head, neck, chest and abdomen, as well as any other areas that might be indicated. During this consultation, veterinarians frequently detect infections of the teeth or ears, and sub-clinical problems such as a heart condition or other organ dysfunction. Early diagnosis allows more effective and successful treatment and may improve the quality of your pet's life.

Since pets age at a more rapid rate than humans do, it is important to their health to ensure that they receive a complete physical examination on at least an annual basis, and more frequently as they approach their senior years. Regardless of the vaccine schedule that is deemed to be appropriate for your dog, if you want to ensure that your pet receives the highest standard of care and protection, he or she should be seen by your veterinarian for a "wellness examination" on at least an annual basis.



This client information sheet is based on material written by: Ernest Ward, DVM