

“Vaccination: Time to Take a Second Look”
“Current and future canine and feline vaccination programs”
by R.D. Schultz, PhD

Important questions have been raised about companion-animal vaccines and vaccination protocols that have existed for many years and provide a substantial source of veterinary practice income. One controversial topic is: "Are we vaccinating too often?" Related issues include vaccine-induced disease and administration of vaccines that may be of limited or no value. Responses to these issues are complex and debatable. Conventional wisdom suggests that vaccination should be performed as often as believed needed and as often as the manufacturer of the vaccine recommends. Research may well demonstrate that most well-cared-for pets are vaccinated too often, while other animals are not vaccinated often enough. Vaccines may cause disease, but such reactions are generally uncommon. However, vaccine-induced diseases appear to be more common in certain breeds and in specific families, suggesting a genetic predisposition to adverse reactions. Clearly, certain vaccines being used are unnecessary, and animals receive vaccines that they don't need. However, it is possible that some vaccines should be administered more often or at an earlier age than the manufacturer recommends in animals that may benefit.

There are no standard answers nor consensus on the issues noted above. Instead of a single vaccination program for most or all animals, programs should be tailored for each individual patient and client situation. Vaccination is a medical decision that should entail the same considerations and reasoning skills required when selecting an appropriate medical treatment or a specific surgical procedure.

Vaccination should not be considered an innocuous procedure, since vaccines may have harmful consequences to patients as well as owners. The patient receives no benefit and may be placed at serious risk when an unnecessary vaccine is given. The owner also risks economic and emotional hardship in exchange for a questionable benefit. Fortunately, with notable exceptions, veterinary vaccines are generally safe and effective. Vaccines have been reasonably priced in the United States, considering the benefit provided by certain vaccines of preventing serious diseases or death in most animals. However, many of the newer vaccines (Lyme disease, feline leukemia, feline infectious peritonitis [FIP], ringworm) do not have this same benefit since they are designed to prevent diseases that don't occur in a high percentage of unvaccinated animals or that aren't associated with high mortality or morbidity as are infections with canine distemper virus (CDV), canine parvovirus type 2 (CPV-2), and feline panleukopenia virus (FPLV).

In this article, I discuss questions frequently asked when designing vaccination programs for dogs or cats. The responses to these questions will differ depending on who answers the questions and the lifestyle of the pet. With this caveat, I offer the following views and recommendations, ones that are based on my experience as well as the collective experience and expertise of certain of my colleagues, namely Drs. Max Appel, Leland Carmichael, Fred Scott, and Larry Swango. My recommendations are based on research results (some published, others not), clinical observations, and my overall experience in infectious diseases and immunology for the past 30 years. I do not expect every recommendation I make to be acceptable to all who read this article; not even my colleagues cited above agree on everything discussed, because a researcher's expectations, interpretation of results, and personal experiences vary widely.

However, for those awaiting the study that will definitively answer many of the questions posed here, that study will never be done, can never be done, and should never be done. This is like looking for the silver bullet that will prevent or cure cancer; there is no silver bullet.

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