Pickens Animal Hospital

VACCINATION FAQ

Why are vaccinations important?

Vaccinations have saved uncountable numbers of family pets from the devastating effects of Parvovirus and Canine and Feline Distemper. Rabies vaccinations are mandatory as a public health issue, to protect both pets and humans from this fatal disease. To be effective, vaccinations are started at a young age and boostered throughout the pet's adult lifetime.

Puppies and kittens are born with immature immune systems, making them highly vulnerable to communicable diseases. Thankfully, partial immunity is transferred from their mothers when nursing. Colostrum is a substance found in the mother's milk for the first few days after giving birth that provides her newborns with important protective proteins against several diseases. These proteins are known as "maternal antibodies". As long as maternal antibodies to a particular disease are active in the newborn's system, they will help give protection against that disease. How long these maternal antibodies last vary between individuals and are affected by many factors. We do know that maternal antibodies are gone around 18 weeks of age. The typical puppy/kitten vaccine series starts around 6-8 weeks of age. Boosters are administered every 3-4 weeks until around 18 weeks of age in hopes of narrowing the "window of opportunity" for infection. This window of opportunity is the time period between when the maternal antibodies wear off and the vaccines are able to stimulate the individual's own immune response to a disease.

Why so many shots? Isn't a single vaccine enough?

No! A single vaccine is never enough to protect your young pet. Until the kitten or puppy's immune system is mature at about 18 weeks of age, their young bodies cannot maintain immunity to communicable diseases.

It is much cheaper and less stressful for both the pet and their family to vaccinate and prevent a disease than it is to treat it. In puppies, for example, the cost of treating Parvovirus is beyond the means of many owners. Consider this: at P.A.H., the cost of a Parvovirus vaccine is $16.00 (as of January 2014). Even including the costs of office exams and repeat visits, the total cost for the puppy vaccine series is $115-$215, depending on how old the puppy is when vaccinations begin. Canine Parvovirus, meanwhile, can cost between $400-1500 (or more) to treat, depending on the number of days of treatment required. Even with the best of treatment, there is never a guarantee that the puppy will survive.

So if my pet gets these vaccinations, I can be certain that he/she will never get sick?

No. There are several factors that influence an animal's immune response to vaccines. We know that some vaccines may only minimize the effects of a disease (i.e. Bordetella, Feline Rhinotracheitis and Feline Calicivirus). We also know that some animals will never respond to vaccines no matter how many they receive. These animals are known as nonresponders. There is no way to predict which individuals will be nonresponders.

What vaccinations does Pickens Animal Hospital recommend?

First, know that the vaccinations recommended by veterinarians may vary with region of the country and other considerations. What is recommended for your friend's pet in Oregon, for example, may be different from what is recommended for our local conditions in the upstate of South Carolina. Other factors include the age of the pet, the pet's life style and any other medical conditions. **The Rabies vaccine is required by law for all dogs and cats in the state of South Carolina and must be administered by a licensed veterinarian or by someone under the direct supervision of a licensed veterinarian. Be sure to keep your computer generated invoice or hand-written Rabies Certificate as legal proof of vaccination.**

1) Core vaccines are those aimed at protection against diseases that cause significant illness and/or death and which the majority of the population is at risk of contracting. These are the vaccines that all pets should receive.

In addition to Rabies, dogs should receive a combination vaccine that protects against Distemper, Hepatitis, Parvovirus and Parainfluenza (DHPP).

In addition to Rabies, cats should receive a combination vaccine known as FVRCP, which protects against the upper respiratory infections Feline Viral Rhinotracheitis and Calicivirus, as well as Feline Distemper (Panleukopenia).

2) Non-core vaccines are for diseases which an individual's life-style gives a greater chance of exposure and development. To determine which non-core vaccines to administer, your veterinarian will take into account how often your dog goes to the dog park or whether you like to hike or travel. If your dog stays in a boarding facility, attends day care or visits a groomer, he'll likely be required to show proof of a Bordetella (canine cough) vaccination.

Canine non-core vaccines include Bordetella, Leptospirosis, Lyme, and Canine Influenza. Feline non-core vaccines include Feline Leukemia (FeLV) and Feline Immunodeficieny (FIV). Depending on where you live or travel, some of these may be moved to the "core" category due to higher disease prevalence in that area.

For cats, the Feline Leukemia vaccine (FeLV) is recommended mainly for outdoor cats. There is a vaccine for Feline Immunodeficiency virus (FIV), although many veterinarians do not recommend it. Cats that receive the vaccine will test positive for the disease and therefore risk euthanasia if they wind up in a shelter.

How often should my pet receive vaccinations?

Vaccines and their frequency are a perennially controversial subject in veterinary medicine. There is no doubt that undervaccination is dangerous. Unvaccinated pets frequently die needlessly from diseases such as Parvovirus and Panleukopenia.

The recommended vaccination intervals can vary with the type of vaccine, age of the pet, lifestyle, local laws and other health factors. Most important among these factors is **disease prevalence in the local area**. In the upstate of South Carolina, we see very high incidence rates of Parvovirus, for example. Rabies is also frequently confirmed in both domestic and wildlife in our environment. About 275 people in South Carolina must undergo preventive treatment for Rabies every year.

Veterinary research has provided data showing that the core vaccines may invoke immunity that lasts for several years if the proper vaccine series has been administered. In light of this, many legitimate veterinary resources recommend extending the intervals between vaccinations in older pets.

Our experience based on thousands of animals treated in 39 years of practice has convinced us that yearly vaccinations is the best protocol for companion animals in our local area. We have, unfortunately, treated Parvovirus in older dogs that had missed an annual booster. A patient such as this might represent a very low probability of contracting disease, but if it is your pet, those percentages no longer matter. Our policy is to provide every patient with the best level of protection we have available.

Because of publicity and "Dr. Google", some poorly informed owners make a decision to skip vaccinations. But is that the right decision? Consider the Distemper vaccine, for example. Before the vaccine was developed, Distemper was the number one cause of death in dogs. There was not an effective cure for Distemper. Veterinarians were limited to treating symptoms and hoping that the dog would live. Dogs that did not die frequently had neurological symptoms afterwards and had difficulty with normal movement. Today, most veterinarians have not seen a case of Distemper in their vaccinated canine patients. The currently available Distemper vaccine is highly effective and will protect your pet.

It is best to work with your veterinarian and tailor a vaccine schedule that suits your pet's individual needs.

Why does my indoor cat need vaccines?

Yes. Most experts agree that indoor animals receive at least the core vaccines. At some point in its life, a pet may have to be boarded, transported, or taken to a hospital for treatment. If your pet is not current on its vaccines, it will be at greater risk for contracting disease during these situations. Indoor cats should receive Rabies vaccines. There are numerous accounts of indoor only cats escaping to the outdoors and ending up in a fight with another animal. There are also several incidents of indoor only cats playing with and catching rabid bats that have entered a house. Remember, South Carolina law requires Rabies vaccinations.

Are there any risks to vaccination?

There is some chance of an adverse reaction to a vaccine. Fortunately, the **benefits of vaccines far outweigh the risks**. Typical mild vaccine reactions include low-grade fever, tenderness at the injection site, mild lethargy, temporary lumps and mild bouts of vomiting and/or diarrhea. More serious but less common reactions include extreme lethargy, protracted vomiting and/or diarrhea, hives, and respiratory difficulty. It is important to report **ANY** reaction to your veterinarian. Side effects such as tenderness at the injection site and mild fever/lethargy may be minimized by giving your pet an anti-inflammatory pain reliever before and after receiving its vaccines. ***Make sure to ask for your veterinarian's advice about which anti-inflammatory is the best and safest choice for your pet.***

If your pet has ever had a serious vaccine reaction, you should speak to your veterinarian about pre-treating your pet with an antihistamine such as Benadryl before vaccination. Vaccines should also be split for these animals, separating injections by one-week intervals to avoid over-stimulating the immune system. It is also wise to leave your pet with your veterinarian the entire day for monitoring. If a severe reaction should develop, your pet can then be treated promptly with injectable medications.