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VACCINATING YOUR DOG - IS EVERY YEAR TOO MUCH?

Vaccinations are a critical component to preventive care for your dog. Thanks to the development of vaccines, dogs have been protected from numerous disease threats, including rabies, distemper, hepatitis and several others. Some of these diseases can be passed from dogs to people — so canine vaccinations have protected human health as well.

Recently, studies have shown that vaccines protect dogs for longer than previously believed. There have also been improvements in the type of vaccines produced. In addition, there is increased awareness and concern that vaccination is not as harmless a procedure as once thought. These factors have led to a growing number of veterinarians who recommend reduced frequency of vaccinations while at the same time tailoring vaccine recommendations to specific risk situations.

To assist veterinarians with making vaccine recommendations for dogs, the American Animal Hospital Association has issued a set of canine vaccine guidelines. Developed by a group of infectious disease experts, immunologists, researchers and practicing veterinarians, these guidelines were first released in 2003 and revised with new information in 2006.

One of AAHA's key recommendations is that all dogs are different — and thus vaccine decisions should be made on an individual basis for each dog. Issues to consider include the age, breed, health status, environment, lifestyle, and travel habits of the dog. Health threats vary from city to city and even in various sections of cities. You can work with your veterinarian to tailor an immunization program that best protects your dog based on his risk and lifestyle factors.

Is vaccinating my pet a risk to his or her health?

Vaccination against disease is a medical procedure and, like all medical procedures, carries some inherent risk. As in any medical procedure or decision, the benefits must be balanced against the risks. Veterinarians recommend that no needless risks should be taken and that the best way to accomplish that is to reduce the number and frequency of administration of unnecessary vaccines.

As is the case with any medical decision, you and your veterinarian should make vaccination decisions after considering your dog's age, lifestyle, and potential exposure to infectious diseases.

What possible risks are associated with vaccination?



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Vaccine reactions, of all types, are infrequent. In general, most vaccine reactions and side effects (such as local pain and swelling) are self-limiting. Allergic reactions are less common, but if untreated can be fatal. These can occur soon after vaccination. If you see such a reaction, please contact your veterinarian as soon as possible.

In a small number of patients, vaccines can stimulate the patient's immune system against his or her own tissues, resulting in diseases that affect the blood, skin, joints or nervous system. Again, such reactions are infrequent but can be life threatening.

There is a possible complication of a tumor developing at the vaccination site in a small number of pets, most frequently cats. Please contact your veterinarian for more information.

How do I know which vaccines my pet needs?

There are two general groups of vaccines to consider: core and noncore vaccines.

Core vaccines are generally recommended for all dogs and protect against diseases that are more serious or potentially fatal. These diseases are found in all areas of North America and are more easily transmitted than noncore diseases. The AAHA guidelines define the following as core vaccines: distemper, adenovirus, parvovirus and rabies.

Noncore vaccines are those reserved for patients at specific risk for infection due to exposure or lifestyle. The AAHA guidelines classify kennel cough, Lyme disease and leptospirosis vaccines within the noncore group.

How often should my dog be vaccinated?

Make sure that your dog completes the initial series of core vaccines administered at the puppy stage, as well as booster shots at one year of age. **Following these one-year boosters, the AAHA Canine Vaccine Guidelines recommend that the distemper, adenovirus and parvovirus core vaccines be administered once every three years. States and municipalities govern how often rabies boosters are administered.** Some areas require a rabies booster be administered annually. Others require a three-year-effective rabies booster be given every three years. Still others allow either a one-year or a three-year rabies vaccine to be utilized.

Noncore vaccinations should be administered whenever the risk of the disease is significant enough to override any risk of vaccination. For example, kennel cough vaccine may need to be administered up to every six months in a dog repeatedly being kenneled or exposed to groups of dogs at grooming salons or dog shows.



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There is a history of yearly vaccinations boosters, and some veterinarians do not feel it is prudent to change that recommendation just yet. However, the AAHA Canine Vaccine Guidelines reflect that there is growing support for extended duration of protection. Thus more veterinarians are vaccinating less frequently and more selectively.

Does this mean I only need to see my veterinarian every three years?

Regular wellness examinations — at least once or twice a year — are the most important preventive measure that you can provide for your dog. Vaccinations are just one component of the wellness visit. To help keep your dog in optimum health, regular wellness examinations are critical — regardless of how often vaccines are administered.

Remember, dogs age at a much faster rate than humans, so a once-yearly exam is similar to a human getting a physical every 5-7 years. Plus they don't always show signs of early disease, and they can't easily communicate discomfort to us. During the wellness exam, your veterinarian has an opportunity to detect and prevent problems at an early stage.

Can my veterinarian conduct a test to see if my dog needs to be vaccinated?

Tests that measure protective antibody levels for diseases are called titers. In recent years reliable titer tests for some diseases such as canine distemper and parvovirus have become more readily available and economical. Veterinarians may recommend using these titer tests in some cases to determine whether or not vaccinations are needed. Your veterinarian can provide you with more information on titer testing.