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Vaccination Information for dogs, cats, ferrets, and rabbits

The British Veterinary Association, World and British Small Animal Veterinary Associations, RSPCA and government Department for the Environment, Food and Rural affairs (DEFRA) strongly recommend the use of vaccination to prevent disease in pet dogs, cats and rabbits.

What diseases can we vaccinate our pets against?

DOGS - Distemper, Hepatitis, Parvovirus, Leptospirosis (core vaccines) and Kennel cough (non core). Rabies (only for pets travelling outside of the UK)

CATS - Cat flu (calicivirus and herpes virus), Panleukopenia (core vaccines) and Feline leukaemia virus (core for cats which go outdoors or are in contact with those that do). Chlamydia felis and Bordetella Bronchiseptica (non-core). Rabies (only for pets travelling outside of the UK).

FERRETS - 'We recommend that all ferrets receive a distemper vaccination yearly. The first vaccine can be given from 12 weeks of age, then a second dose is given 2-4 weeks later. After this, annual vaccinations are recommended. Distemper is a serious disease that causes coughing, sneezing, ocular and nasal discharge initially, but is almost always fatal. There is no licensed vaccine for distemper in ferrets in the UK, but we are able to use the dog vaccine instead. Using the dog vaccine is off-licence and the vet will discuss this with you at the time of the appointment. Vaccine reactions are rare but older ferrets should remain on-site for 20 minutes for monitoring (in the waiting room).

RABBITS – Myxomatosis, Viral haemorrhagic disease variants 1 and 2. There is a new highly virulent strain of RVHD2 in Europe which it may be possible to vaccinate against. Rabies (only for pets travelling outside of the UK)

Why do we vaccinate our pets?

Many of these diseases are life-threatening and difficult or impossible to treat once a pet has contracted them. Vaccination is the only proven method of preventing infection with these diseases.



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Kennel cough is the least serious - it is rarely life threatening in otherwise healthy dogs and can be treated with anti-inflammatories and antibiotics if needed. However, it is also by far the most prevalent of the diseases - We see several cases a day during the peak, summer, season. Kennel cough is unpleasant for the dog and may become inconvenient for the owner as affected dogs cannot be accepted into boarding kennels, potentially ruining holiday plans at the last minute.

Pets must be vaccinated against rabies to be able to travel abroad on the Pet Passport scheme.

How does a vaccine work?

Vaccines contain a tiny dose of either dead or live disease particles. These particles stimulate the pet's immune system so that antibodies are produced.

If the pet encounters the real disease, it will already have antibodies ready to attack the virus or bacteria, so the pet does not become ill.

How do I know that vaccines are safe?

In the UK, all veterinary medicines, including vaccines, are regulated by a government agency known as the Veterinary Medicines Directorate. A strict, independent scientific assessment is made of all vaccines to check that they are safe and effective, before they can be used in pets.

Vaccines are classed as prescription veterinary medicines and can only be prescribed by a veterinary surgeon. The veterinary surgeon must examine your pet to ensure that they are fit and healthy prior to vaccination. The vet will also discuss your pet's lifestyle with you to ensure that your pet is vaccinated against the correct diseases. (for example, cats that never go outdoors or to a cattery remain at risk of cat flu but are at very low risk of catching leukaemia virus, so your vet may recommend that only the cat flu part of the vaccine is given to these cats).

What about side effects of vaccination?

It is extremely rare for any serious side effects to follow vaccination. It is the job of the Veterinary Medicines Directorate to scrutinise the scientific evidence to ensure that any possible adverse effects are clearly outweighed by the benefits of giving the vaccination.

A common reaction to vaccination is a small (less than 2cm) swelling at the site of the injection. (usually in the scruff of the neck) No treatment is necessary and this swelling will disappear on its own within 4 weeks.

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It is rare for more serious effects to occur. However, vaccines are deliberately stimulating the immune system, so a small number of pets develop a slight increase in temperature following vaccination which may cause reduced activity and appetite for 24 hours after vaccination. In rare cases, hypersensitivity and allergic reactions to vaccines have been reported, with signs such as vomiting, diarrhoea, facial swelling and collapse.

Kennel cough vaccination is a live vaccination, administered directly up the nostril. Mild cases of sneezing, coughing and runny eyes may be seen after kennel cough vaccination, especially in young puppies. This will usually cease without specific treatment. Because the vaccine is a live vaccine, the manufacturers recommend that vaccinated dogs should not have contact with immunocompromised people for six weeks following vaccination (dog owners may wish to discuss this with their GP if they are taking organ rejection or chemotherapy medications).

What shall I do if I suspect that my pet is experiencing a side effect to vaccination?

First, consult your vet who can check whether your pet requires any treatment. See your vet if a swelling associated with the injection site does not resolve within 4 weeks. Your veterinary surgeon is obliged to report suspect adverse reactions to any medication, including vaccines, to the Veterinary Medicines Directive.

Do vaccines need to be given every year?

That depends on the vaccine. Puppies and kittens require a full starter course of vaccines and a full booster one year after the initial course. This is because it can take repeated vaccination to generate a strong immune response.

Following this initial vaccination course, there is evidence in dogs that the distemper, hepatitis and parvovirus immunity lasts at least three years. Cat vaccine licences for duration of immunity vary. For the vaccine we use currently after the initial vaccination course the cat flu component is given annually with the leukaemia component given every 3 years.

Rabies immunity lasts for three years in both cats and dogs. For this reason, we only administer these vaccinations every three years in adult cats and dogs.

However, the scientific evidence shows that immunity does not last this long for leptospirosis, kennel cough, cat flu, myxomatosis or viral haemorrhagic disease. These vaccines should be given every year.



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In practice, this means that every dog, cat and rabbit should visit the vet every year for a health check. The vet will check your pet's teeth, skin, eyes, ears, heart, chest, microchip, abdomen and musculoskeletal system, and answer any questions that you may have about your pet's health, behaviour or management. They will discuss your pet's lifestyle to determine which vaccinations are appropriate and to tailor parasite preventative treatments to your pet's individual risk. They will check your pet's vaccination record and advise you as to which vaccines are due for your pet that year.

What about titre testing?

Titre testing involves taking a blood sample from your pet to check their antibody levels to the diseases in the vaccine. Some people suggest that it is a good idea to check the antibody levels when the next booster is due, to see if the pet still has protection against the diseases. If the antibody levels are still high enough to give the pet protection, these people suggest that there is no need to give the booster.

There are two problems with this approach:

1. Titre testing is not available for leptospirosis or kennel cough, so these vaccinations will need to be given anyway.
2. Even if the antibody levels are high enough to suggest that your pet is protected on the day of the test, the titre testing gives no indication of how long antibody levels will remain high enough. The levels could drop the next day, the next week or not for months and there is no way of knowing when this will be. This may lead to your pet not being adequately protected against these life-threatening diseases. For this reason, many kennels and catteries will not accept titre testing as a substitute for vaccination.

Summary

Vaccination of dogs, cats and rabbits is strongly recommended to protect pets against life-threatening diseases.

Vaccines are regulated closely to ensure that they remain very safe, and that the benefits of vaccinating vastly outweigh any risks.

The vaccination protocols at Acorn House Veterinary Hospital are based on licensing recommendations and guidelines issued by expert groups such as the WSAVA (World Small



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Animal Veterinary Association), BSAVA (British Small Animal Veterinary Association) and BVA (British Veterinary Association).

Your veterinary surgeon will make a specific recommendation for your pet based on your pet's health and lifestyle.

If you have any questions you can ask your vet or contact the Veterinary Medicines Directive pharmacovigilance team on 01932 338427.

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