

Dog Vaccinations: Do They Prevent Disease or Cause It?

Dog vaccinations—it's the most controversial topic in the realm of dog health. The information in this guide is the result of extensive research, conversations with holistic veterinarians and my own personal experience. Some of this information may upset or anger you. Please realize, it is not meant to alienate you from your veterinarian. We need our vets to care for our dogs. Whether it's a torn cruciate ligament or urinary tract infection, we need their expertise to help our dogs heal. If you use the services of a holistic veterinarian, then you probably already know at least some of the information provided here.



If your dog's doctor is a conventional vet, some or all of the information in this dog vaccinations guide may be news to you. If this is the case, I suggest you write a list of questions and make an appointment so that you can calmly review your concerns with your vet and form a future vaccination plan. If he/she is not receptive to answering your questions or makes you feel your concerns are not legitimate, I suggest you find a new veterinarian. Just as you need to take an active role in your own health, you need to participate in your dog's health care as well. A good vet—or medical doctor—understands, respects and welcomes your participation.

Snapshot: Dog Vaccinations

Here's a quick overview if you're in a hurry. Come back later when you have time to read the complete guide.

- How dog vaccinations (vaccines) work: A vaccine contains the virus or bacteria of a specific disease. The microorganisms used are either dead (killed) or live, but in a weakened state. The small amount of virus is meant to stimulate the dog's immune system to respond by producing antibodies to fight that specific disease. Once created, the antibodies will often remain for years.
- Dog vaccinations: Those available include rabies, distemper, parvo virus, leptospirosis, Lyme disease, bordetella (kennel cough), coronavirus, adenovirus (hepatitis), giardia and parainfluenza. Many holistic veterinarians recommend keeping dog vaccinations to a minimum, focusing on those offering protection for life-threatening diseases that dogs are most likely to be exposed to: Rabies, distemper and parvo.
- Frequency of dog vaccinations: While annual rabies vaccinations for dogs was once the norm, in the last few years, all 50 states have adopted a three-year protocol. However, many vets, including those involved in The Rabies Challenge Fund, believe that the protection provided by vaccines extends to five years, seven years, or more.
- Titer tests: If antibodies against a particular disease exist in a dog's blood sample, then the dog is protected. Even when antibodies are not seen, if a dog was ever vaccinated against or exposed to a particular disease, this information is stored in the dog's memory cells, offering what some vets believe is immunity for life.

For many years, dog vaccinations—rabies, distemper, parvo virus and others—were given annually. This was not based on science, however. Science has shown for some time that vaccines protect against the intended disease far longer than one year.

Getting Away from Annual Dog Vaccinations

Here's what a number of veterinarians have to say on the subject of annual vaccinations:

- Dr. Dennis Macy, vaccine specialist at Colorado State University's College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences: "...that protocol has been totally arbitrary. It's not based on the duration of immunity studies. The public and veterinarians have become oversold on the vaccine as a cure-all."
- Don Hamilton, a holistic veterinarian who has practiced for over 30 years, writes in *Homeopathic Care for Dogs & Cats*: "Having been trained conventionally, I initially supported vaccinations, but my observations have gradually shown me that they create much more illness than they prevent. I recommend avoiding vaccination in almost all circumstances, as I believe it mainly creates illness rather than preventing illness."
- *Current Veterinary Therapy XI*, a 1992 conventional veterinary textbook, in a section on dog and cat vaccinations written by Ron Schulz, Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison and Tom Phillips, DVM, Scripps Institute: "A practice that was started many years ago and that lacks scientific validity or verification is annual revaccination. Almost without exception there is no immunologic requirement for annual revaccination. Immunity to viruses persists for years or for the life of the animal. The practice of annual vaccination in our opinion should be considered of questionable efficacy..."

In the last few years, many veterinarians have moved away from annual dog vaccinations, recommending that shots for distemper and parvo be given every three years. The frequency of rabies vaccinations, however, is determined by each state's laws. Fortunately, all states have adopted the three-year rabies protocol, with Alabama the last state to come on board in 2009.

It seems unacceptable that we for many years risked the health of our dogs by giving annual vaccines when the vaccine manufacturers themselves had documented that protection lasted for at least three years. In other words, for decades, states adopted the annual approach based on fear (of pets passing rabies to people) rather than science.

Dog Vaccinations Defined

Before exploring dog vaccinations any further, let's first establish a basic understanding of how vaccines work. A vaccine contains the virus or bacteria of a specific disease (rabies, distemper, etc.) The microorganisms used are either dead (killed) or live, but in a weakened state. The small amount of virus is meant to stimulate the dog's immune system to respond by producing antibodies to fight that specific disease. Once created, the antibodies will often remain for years. The dog's immune system also stores information in memory cells so that the body remembers the disease, further extending the period of immunity by years, or perhaps even the lifetime of the dog.

Vaccine Additives Also Present a Threat

As I show above, dog vaccinations are not without risks. That alone provides controversy. But there's more: Many vaccines contain adjuvants, or immune system boosters, to encourage the body to fight the disease contained in the vaccine. These adjuvants can cause inflammation at the site of vaccination and in some cases cause a sarcoma that can be fatal. Some vaccines also include preservatives such as mercury, a highly-toxic

substance. Of course, the vaccine manufacturers and many vets will tell you the mercury is such a small amount that it won't cause damage. But how do they *know* that? The answer, of course, is "they don't." Common sense tells me, however, that giving my dog a toxic substance over several years is going to negatively affect my dog's health.

The Danger of Giving Multiple Dog Vaccinations

A dog's response to a vaccine takes a lot of his body's energy, just as it would if the body was responding to the "real" disease. In point, a dog's white blood cell count is lower following a vaccination. So common sense tells us that this means, for a period following a dog vaccination—perhaps even years—the dog's immune system is in a weakened state and more vulnerable to any number of diseases, including cancer.

So when you consider the fact that many vets administer dog vaccinations that contain bacteria or virus for two, three, five—even SEVEN diseases, you can see how this can adversely affect your canine best friend in a huge way, perhaps crippling his immune system for life. When a canine receives a "three-in-one" or "five-in-one" vaccine, his body is creating antibodies to fight off multiple diseases at the same time. Is it any wonder his immune system is compromised?

Types of Dog Vaccinations Available

Just because a dog vaccination is available doesn't mean your dog should get it. In deciding which vaccines your furry friend should receive, choose to vaccinate against the illnesses your dog is likely to come in contact with and of those, which are serious illnesses. The reason I say this is because dog vaccinations (and people vaccinations, for that matter), are not benign. You need to weigh the risks against the benefits.

Dog vaccinations are available for the following:

- Rabies: This deadly disease causes inflammation of the brain. It should be noted, however, that 90% of the rabies cases reported in the U.S. are caused by wild animals, not dogs and cats.
- Canine distemper: This causes diarrhea and vomiting and is often fatal in puppies and adult dogs with weakened immune systems.
- Parvo virus: Like distemper, symptoms are diarrhea and vomiting. It is usually considered a danger to puppies although an adult with a compromised immune system is also at risk of dying if contracted.
- Leptospirosis: Dogs can acquire this illness from wild animals (urine) and it can be deadly. It affects the kidneys and liver.
- Adenovirus (Hepatitis): This is a respiratory disease.
- Bordetella (Kennel cough): Found in shelters and boarding kennels, it is considered treatable with antibiotics.
- *Girardia*: A parasite that can cause diarrhea and is tough to treat.
- Lyme disease: Symptoms include lameness, fever, weakness. It is acquired through ticks and treated with antibiotics.
- Parainfluenza: A respiratory illness.
- Coronavirus: A contagious disease that attacks the intestinal tract.

Does your dog need all of these vaccines? "No," say many veterinarians today, especially holistic vets. Choose vaccines for the diseases your dog is most likely to come in contact with. Most holistic veterinarians recommend these "core" dog vaccinations: Rabies, distemper and parvo virus.

The Risks of Dog Vaccinations

In *Homeopathic Care for Cats & Dogs*, Dr. Don Hamilton cites his own experience in witnessing blood work before and after dog vaccinations that showed "greatly increased liver inflammation a couple of months after the vaccines." He goes on to say that some cases of canine liver inflammation may be autoimmune—the liver is attacked by the body's immune system. "This may be triggered by drugs, pesticides, other pollutants and vaccination. I suspect these causes incite most cases of liver disease in dogs and perhaps many cats."

Dr. Hamilton reports the following severe reactions to dog vaccinations in some patients: Swelling of the face, hives, breathing difficulty, fever, vomiting, diarrhea, trembling and weakness. He also notes behavior changes occurring regularly following dog vaccinations such as fear and aggression and less often, seizures and paralysis.

In *Pet Care in the New Century*, Dr. Macy at Colorado State University's Veterinary School is quoted on the dangers of dog vaccinations: "It appears the the number of vaccines that one gets directly correlates to the increased risk for these adverse events, whether it be polyarthritis (affecting many joints) or sarcomas or autoimmune disease in dogs."

Investigative author Ann Martin provides the following information in her book, *Protect Your Pet*: In a 1998 report, Bill Fortney, DVM, assistant professor at Kansas State University's School of Veterinary Medicine, stated, "It is not uncommon for dogs to have a reaction to vaccines, causing other difficulties including death. One of the problems with the leptospirosis vaccine is that it causes more reaction than the others." The same report advises against vaccines for coronavirus and Lyme disease because the risks outweigh the benefits.

In *The Holistic Guide for a Healthy Dog*, authors Wendy Volhard and Kerry Brown, DVM, write: "Immunologists are finding a direct correlation between the increase in autoimmune and chronic disease and the overuse of vaccines. The Lyme disease vaccine is thought to have been responsible for the collapse of some dogs' immune systems and a recent study at Cornell University suggests that treating the disease is less risky than getting the vaccine."

How Long Does Protection Last?

Manufacturers label rabies vaccines as one year or three year, and usually they are the same vaccine, just different labels. According to Dr. Hamilton, vaccine manufacturers test the length of rabies protection at one and three years. They do not even attempt to see if the vaccine provides protection against rabies for five years, seven years or longer. Why? There really seems to be only one logical explanation: To prove that a rabies vaccine protects literally for years, or possibly even for the life of the dog, would greatly cut into the manufacturers' profits. Therefore, they have no motivation to prove with research how long the protection really lasts.

The standard protocol for distemper/parvo vaccination is three years in many areas of the country. While this is a big improvement over a few years ago when they were given annually, some vets argue that it is still overvaccinating. Research at the University of Wisconsin shows that dog vaccinations for parvo virus, distemper and hepatitis last a *minimum* of seven years.

The Rabies Challenge Fund

Thankfully, there are veterinarians motivated to do what is right, regardless of whether or not it is profitable. Some of these vets are involved in The Rabies Challenge Fund. The goal of RCF is to determine the duration of immunity conveyed by rabies vaccines and using this data, extend the required interval for rabies boosters to 5 and then to 7 years. This project depends primarily upon grassroots gifts for funding the costs of conducting the research.

The University of Wisconsin has donated all of the necessary overhead costs for these studies, which normally amount to 48% of the direct research costs. Dr. Ron Schultz, the principal investigator, is volunteering his time in conducting the research. Dr. W. Jean Dodds and her staff at Hemopet are also donating their efforts, as is Founder Kris Christine.

To read more about this extremely important effort, visit [The Rabies Challenge Fund](#).

Killed Vaccine, Modified Live Vaccine & Recombinant Vaccine

The danger with using modified live virus or killed virus vaccines is that the vaccine can actually cause the disease it is meant to prevent. A number of vets, including Don Hamilton, have written about witnessing this phenomenon.

There is also a third type of vaccine, called a recombinant or live vectored vaccine. This vaccine uses the protein of a specific virus as opposed to the disease itself. When the vaccine is injected, the dog's immune system responds by making antibodies to fight the disease. It offers a huge benefit: there is no chance of the dog developing the disease through the vaccine.

Frequency of Dog Vaccinations

Currently, all states have a three-year rabies vaccination requirement in place. In Iowa where I live, and in many other states, the state law requires a one-year rabies vaccine for a puppy (at five months) or an adult with an unknown vaccination history, such as a stray dog at a shelter. One-year later the dog receives a three-year rabies vaccine, and every three years after that. It's important to know, by asking your vet or calling your state veterinarian's office, how stringent the deadline is for revaccinating. In Iowa, for instance, if you are ONE DAY late on the date (e.g., your dog was previously vaccinated on June 23 and you revaccinate the dog three years later on June 24), my lovely state of Iowa requires that the dog have a one-year vaccine rather than a three-year. As I have stated earlier in this guide, vaccines provide coverage for years so this law is not based on scientific evidence. And by forcing the dog to undergo a rabies dog vaccination the following year—rather than three years—increases the likelihood that the dog's immune system is compromised and the dog will eventually develop disease as a result.

Titer Testing to Determine Immunity

A titer test measures the amount of antibodies a dog has in his blood against a specific disease (rabies, distemper, etc.) If there are any present at all, then protection against the disease is still intact. On the other hand, the lack of antibodies in the blood does not necessarily mean there is no immunity. If the dog has been vaccinated even once, or been exposed to a disease such as parvo, which most dogs have been by adulthood, then there could be immunity in the memory cells, as I discussed earlier. There is no easy test for cell immunity, however, short of a very involved and expensive laboratory test. Titer testing does not cover it.

Since many veterinary immunologists contend that any vaccine given after the dog is one year old will provide immunity against the disease for life, it is up to you to decide what is best for your canine best friend.

What the Experts Recommend

For several decades now, Dr. Jean Dodds has been talking about the negative impact of overvaccinating pets. She suggests a simple, basic protocol for dog vaccinations. Thankfully many veterinary schools have begun teaching this responsible, conservative approach.

Dr. Dodds' protocol for puppies: Distemper/parvo modified live virus at 9-10 weeks, again at 14 weeks and (optional) again at 16 weeks. This would be repeated one year later. After that, you should use titer testing to determine if additional vaccination is needed during the dog's lifetime.

Dr. Dodds recommends a rabies vaccine at 20 weeks or older; this shot should be given 3-4 weeks following distemper/parvo vaccine. Do not give all of the vaccines at the same visit. The rabies should be repeated one year later.

Some vets also recommend separating the distemper and parvo virus vaccinations by several weeks to reduce the likelihood of overwhelming the puppy's immune system.

In the case of an adult dog adopted from a shelter or rescue, be sure you have a record of the dog vaccinations. In most cases, if you adopt a dog from one of these organizations, he/she has received vaccinations against distemper/parvo and rabies. You should repeat these vaccines one year later (but separated by several weeks) and after that, use titer testing to determine when and if a vaccine is needed. Of course, if you do a titer test and find that your dog is still protected against rabies at three years but your state law says you must vaccinate every three years regardless, then you have a quandary. Many states will not accept a titer test as proof of protection against rabies.

While it should go without saying, I'll say it anyway: NEVER vaccinate a sick dog. Common sense, plus the manufacturer's warning on the vaccine label, should tell you this is the route to take.

I would also recommend waiting to vaccinate following surgery, since the dog's immune system is already taxed by recovery. To give a shot or shots at that time is almost assuredly going to compromise the dog's immune system—if not immediately, then several years down the line.