

Pet Immunization: Far Riskier Than You Might Think, yet Highly Promoted by Vets

Make this mistake, and you'll throw money away - along with your precious pet's health. Vets have a strong financial incentive to promote this. Here's what I recommend instead. But don't be gouged - some vets ask ridiculous fees. Here's what you should really expect to pay.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- August is National Immunization Awareness Month, and while the goal of the traditional veterinary community is to promote pet vaccinations, it's important for pet guardians to understand the difference between "vaccination" and "immunization"
- Immunization, not automatic re-vaccination, should be the goal. If an animal has achieved long-lasting immunity from a previous vaccination, re-vaccination offers no benefit, only risk
- Knowledgeable pet parents insist on antibody titer tests to measure their dog's or cat's immunity to disease, and opt out of unnecessary, potentially risky re-vaccinations

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The traditional veterinary community has decided to co-opt the CDC's "National Immunization Awareness Month" for humans, which occurs each year in August. The North American Veterinary Community (NAVC) and the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) encourage their membership to "Use August 'National Immunization Awareness Month' to Promote Pet Vaccination Awareness".¹

The goal is clearly to promote vaccinations, though the word used to describe the month-long awareness campaign is immunization, not vaccination. This is a hugely important distinction. If a dog is already immunized against, say, distemper, there is no benefit to his health in vaccinating him again against distemper, but there *is* a risk of adverse side effects each time a vaccine is given.

Is the Goal to Immunize Pets, or Vaccinate Them Over and Over?

If the traditional veterinary community was truly interested in ensuring pets are immunized against disease, they would be promoting antibody titer tests to measure each animal's immunity to the core canine diseases (distemper, parvo, adenovirus, and rabies) and core feline diseases (panleukopenia, calicivirus, herpes, and rabies).

Unfortunately, the majority of conventional veterinarians prefer to simply re-vaccinate every pet every year, or every 3 years if they're following the latest guidelines for vaccinations — without establishing whether the animal is already immune to the disease being vaccinated against.

Traditional veterinary practices also often recommend non-core vaccines that may not be very effective, long-lasting, or even necessary depending on where the pet lives and his or her lifestyle. For example, an indoor-only cat's immunization needs based on potential exposure to disease are very different from those of a cat that roams free outdoors. And in my opinion, no dog needs a bordetella vaccine, yet they are routinely given.

Something to Keep in Mind: Vaccinations Are a Major Profit Center for Veterinary Practices

The markup on rabies vaccines, as one example, is obscene — 2,400% to 6,200% in many cases. Estimates are that removing the one-year rabies vaccination/office visit for dogs alone could reduce a veterinarian's income 25% to 30%. And this example involves just one type of vaccine, and just one type of pet.

One conservative estimate is that over half of dog visits and nearly three quarters of cat vet visits are for vaccinations.

When you consider the markup on vaccines, the number of vet visits scheduled only for immunizations, and the typically short duration of those visits, the "vaccination business" can prove very lucrative for veterinary practices that promote it.

Veterinarians aren't the only ones making a living off vaccination shots. The drug companies who manufacture vaccines have enjoyed year-over-year sales increases for well over a decade.

The US is the largest consumer of vaccines by a huge margin over any other country.

Vaccination ≠ Immunization

Vaccination and immunization are not one and the same. Immunization is the outcome of effective vaccination against disease and/or exposure to a disease that the animal recovers from. The act of administering a vaccine doesn't automatically mean the animal has been immunized against the disease, however, that is the assumption.

Since I don't like to assume an animal is protected against disease, I make it a practice to run titer tests within a few weeks of the last round of puppy or kitten shots to ensure immunity has been achieved.

When an animal is successfully vaccinated against certain diseases (distemper, parvo, and adenovirus in dogs, and panleukopenia in cats) and becomes immunized, she receives what we call sterile immunity. Sterile immunity lasts a minimum of 7 to 9 years, up to a maximum of lifetime immunity as measured by titer tests. This means the pet cannot become infected, nor will she shed the virus should she be exposed. Since the diseases of distemper, parvo, hepatitis (adenovirus), and panleukopenia are everywhere, the risk of exposure is constant.

Other types of vaccines, typically non-core vaccines (called bacterins) against bacterial derived diseases such as Lyme disease, leptospirosis, bordetella (kennel cough), canine influenza (a virus, but one that mutates constantly so vaccine is not consistently protective), and others, do not produce sterile immunity. These vaccines last a year at the most, and antibody levels against these diseases (as measured by titer tests) decrease with each passing year, meaning lifelong protection is questionable.

I prefer to run IFA (immunofluorescence antibody) titer tests for parvo and distemper because they give a clear-cut answer, either "yes the animal is protected" or "no the animal is not protected". Serology and other testing methods can be confusing for owners. For example, a low serology score doesn't mean the pet isn't protected against disease. It's possible an animal may still be protected for up to a year or longer thanks to immune memory cells.

For purposes of comparison, veterinary core vaccines are similar to human polio and MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccines that provide lifetime immunity. Non-core veterinary vaccines can be compared to the human tetanus vaccine, which is also a bacterin and may not last for a lifetime.

How to Play It Safe and Smart With Pet Vaccinations

Discuss what kinds of vaccines your pet needs, and how often, with your veterinarian. I strongly encourage you to try to find a **holistic vet** to care for your pet, especially when it comes to vaccinations.

If you can't locate a holistic vet in your area, make sure not to take your pet to any veterinary practice that promotes annual or more frequent re-vaccinations. Also try to avoid any boarding facility, groomer, training facility, or other animal service that requires you to vaccinate your pet more than necessary. Look for pet care providers who accept antibody titer tests in lieu of proof of vaccination. Insure each vaccine your dog or cat receives meets the following criteria:

- Your pet is healthy! Animals must be healthy to receive vaccines, so if your pet has allergies, endocrine issues, organ dysfunction, cancer (or is a cancer survivor), or another medical issue he or she is NOT a candidate to receive vaccines
- It is for a life threatening disease (this eliminates most on the list immediately)
- Your pet has the opportunity to be exposed to the disease (for example, indoor cats have little to no exposure)
- The vaccine is considered both effective and safe (most aren't)
- Do not vaccinate a pet that has had a previous vaccine reaction of any kind
- If you do vaccinate your pet, ask your holistic vet to provide a homeopathic vaccine detox such as Thuja (a common choice for all vaccines except rabies)

Rabies vaccines are required by law, but insist on the 3-year vs. the 1-year vaccine and request the homeopathic rabies vaccine detoxifier Lyssin from your holistic vet. If your pet is young, ask to have the rabies vaccine given after 4 months of age, preferably closer to 6 months, to reduce the risk of an adverse reaction. Sick pets should never be vaccinated against rabies.

A Final Word About Antibody Titer Tests

Antibody levels can be measured from a blood draw, but be aware that antibody titer tests can be outrageously expensive depending on where you have them done. I recommend shopping around, because there is just no reason the cost of a simple antibody blood test for distemper or parvo should be prohibitive.

I've heard dog owners complain that their vet charges \$200-\$450 for a distemper/parvo vaccine titer test, which is ridiculous, and surely persuades some pet owners to re-vaccinate instead because it's more affordable.

If you're interested in titer tests for your pet and your vet's cost seems high, call around to other practices in your area. A reasonable cost for an office visit, blood draw and distemper/parvo titer test should be around \$70-\$120, depending on where the blood is sent and how (samples sent overnight obviously cost more). As a point of reference, **Hemolife Diagnostics**, owned by Dr. Jean Dodds, charges around \$50 for the distemper/parvo titer test, which is run from a blood sample any vet can send in.

So let's all celebrate National Immunization Awareness Month by remembering that the words "vaccination" and "immunization" are not interchangeable, and that insuring your pet is immunized against disease does not mean subjecting to him to automatic re-vaccinations at regular intervals.

Sources and References

AVMA.org

¹ [VetFolio](#)
