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Vaccination - Why should I? Why shouldn't I?

The idea of vaccination conjures up different thoughts in all of us, be it for our children, our dogs, cats or rabbits. Ask around and you will find horror stories of diseases that could have been prevented by vaccinating and you are just as likely to hear horror stories of adverse reactions to those same vaccinations. I come across a lot of confusion and concern regarding vaccination so I hope this information sheet will outline some facts and help you to make an informed decision for your pets.

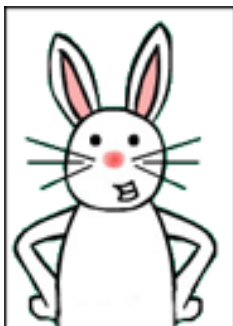


Why should you?

We vaccinate to prevent disease. The vaccines we use commonly protect our pets against a range of diseases that we don't have a whole lot of luck in treating. Let me give you a few examples...

In cats in the 1980's a disease caused by Feline Leukaemia Virus was devastating breeding catteries around the world. This virus first attacks the immune system and then can actually cause cancer. Thanks to vaccination the incidence of Feline Leukaemia Virus has dropped dramatically.

Now let's take dogs: Historically distemper was a really common and serious disease. It is caused by a virus which causes not only respiratory disease but digestive disease and neurological disease too. Thanks to a vaccine developed in the 1960's, we rarely see distemper these days. So why do you need to keep on giving vaccinations to a rare disease? Well, even though it's rare, distemper is still in circulation. If the vast majority of dogs in an area are vaccinated, then there is nowhere for the virus to circulate and multiply and so the level of disease remains very low. If fewer and fewer people vaccinate then the amount of virus in a community of dogs rises and more and more dogs become at risk.



Another question I'm often asked is "Why do our animals need yearly boosters if people don't need them?" This is because the diseases our animals suffer have yet to be eradicated, this leaves our pets at risk of disease all the time. Compare this to people, with a course of polio vaccines given to every child in the country, the disease is almost unheard of. With no circulating disease there is no need for a yearly top up of an adult person's immunity to polio. Compare this to rabbits for example. We can vaccinate our pet rabbits against Myxomatosis but it is an impossible task to also vaccinate the entire wild rabbit population of Great Britain. This means that levels of Myxomatosis are high from the wild rabbits leaving our pet bunnies constantly at risk. So we give boosters to top up pet rabbits immunity to Myxomatosis every 12 months.

Why shouldn't you?

There are of course concerns about vaccination and it is true that it is neither 100% safe nor 100% effective. Some reactions to vaccinations happen immediately after the vaccination is given. These

reactions vary in severity from the very mild to very severe. At the mild end of the spectrum, pets can be a little off colour for 12-24 hours after a vaccine and they sometimes have aching or a local reaction in the area where the vaccine was injected. The more severe reactions are very unusual occurring in only 0.6 to 4 out of every 10,000 animals who are vaccinated, but this rarity is of little comfort to the owner of an affected pet. An example of an immediate severe reaction to vaccination would be anaphylaxis.



There are also reactions that occur sometime after the vaccination was given. Facts about these reactions are difficult to ascertain since it is always hard to prove that a problem occurred as a direct result of a vaccination given previously. However there are suspicions that vaccination may be one possible cause of immune mediated disease. Also tumours have been reported at the site of previous vaccinations. The association between a tumour called a sarcoma and vaccination has been proven in cats where the incidence of this is about 1 in 20,000 cats (0.00005%) vaccinated.

The next question is do we over-vaccinate? Certainly we know that an animal's immunity can last much longer than the set vaccination interval. The problem is that we also know some individuals immunity doesn't last very long at all. The vaccination interval is set to protect those with the least long-lived immunity. So how do you know if your pet is protected and whether they need repeat vaccinations? There are commercially available blood tests for dogs which measure immunity to parvovirus, distemper and adenovirus. So to avoid vaccinating dogs unnecessarily, we can simply take a blood sample and send it to the lab and determine what level of immunity your dog has at that time then vaccinate or not as appropriate. All dogs would still need a booster vaccination for leptospirosis since that isn't included in the blood test, and being a killed vaccine, it has a shorter period of immunity anyway.

There is an argument to say that if the vast majority of animals in a community are vaccinated the level of disease will be very low. With a low level of disease any unvaccinated animals are at low risk of infection. So provided the community conscious people keep vaccinating their pets it's all good. But what if more and more people start relying on others to protect their community of pets, the level of disease will rise. This is one of the reasons that parvovirus seems to have made a bit of a come-back recently.

Hope Vets opinion...



Here is what I think, if you weigh up the risks of vaccination against the severity of the diseases they protect against I am broadly pro-vaccination. As a vet you experience firsthand the cats with cancer caused by a preventable feline leukaemia virus, the puppies with preventable parvovirus diarrhoea, collapsed and fighting for their lives and the rabbits found dead in their hutches from preventable VHD. So it's only natural that vets are desperate to prevent this suffering. As vets we also see reactions we suspect may have been attributable to a vaccination and in my experience the former images crowd out the latter.



Having said that we have to try and minimise any risk for our patients. To this end at Hope Vets we try and base our vaccination strategies on a risk-based assessment for every animal. We also try to use brands of vaccines with the most infrequent booster intervals and brands that have the most flexibility to tailor the vaccine we give to the animals needs. We are also very happy to offer blood tests to determine whether an individual requires vaccination in the first place.



At the end of the day, just like whether or not you give your child the MMR vaccine, it is your decision whether and how often to vaccinate your pets. All we ask is that you consider both sides of the argument carefully and make an informed choice.