

Vaccinating Your Pet - When was the last time your pet had its shots? Keep your cat or dog healthy with our expert tips on vaccinating your pet.

By Joanne Ingrassia (http://www.canadianliving.com/life/pets/vaccinating_your_pet.php)

Everyone agrees that pet vaccinations are necessary, but veterinarians are starting to ask how often is often enough. As a result of new research, some vets are stretching the time between shots up to three years.

"How long vaccination immunity will last in pets is subject to intense research and debate in the veterinary community," says Dr. Bernard Vallée, chairperson of the national issues committee for the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association. The question isn't only whether vaccines may provide immunity for extended intervals. There's growing concern that repeat vaccinations may carry some risks of their own; vaccinating less frequently could lessen these risks.

In 1991 veterinarians began to report a higher than expected number of cancers -- predominantly at vaccination-injection sites -- in cats. Dr. Nigel Gumley, a partner at Alta Vista Veterinary Hospital in Ottawa, says tumours developed "in a very small percentage of cats (one to three per 10,000)."

Some vets have also reported rare but similar tumours in dogs and ferrets. Even though the incidence is so low, in the United States a task force was set up to find out more. It released its first set of guidelines in 1998, suggesting that vaccinations for certain diseases could be given every three years. Dr. James Richards, the director of the Cornell Feline Health Center at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., and a member of the task force, says there is still no universal protocol for dogs and cats.

And the research done to date is not enough to convince all vets to change their recommendations. "You have two schools of thought," says Gumley. "You have the veterinarians who say, 'No, we're not going to do anything different because we know what we're doing now is working: vaccination is effective and very low risk.' Then you get the other group."

Dr. Greg Usher of Usher Animal Hospital in Toronto is now inoculating some pets at three-year intervals. He emphasizes that the frequency is individually determined -- based on the particular animal's age, health and lifestyle as well as the risk of rabies and other viruses in the pet's home area. "From what I've been reading in veterinary journals and what we're seeing, I think this makes sense," he says. "I think we're getting away from the attitude of 'I've been doing this for 20 years, let's keep on doing it.'"

Vallée supports this approach. "Vaccination is a medical procedure," he says. "For each individual patient, we veterinarians have to do a risk-versus-benefit assessment of the vaccinations and discuss this with our clients."

City bylaws also play a role, especially with rabies prevention. Some municipalities may recommend annual rabies vaccinations even though there are vaccines available that are effective for three years.

So, does this mean you can forget that yearly checkup at the vet? Not a good idea, says Gumley. "I think as a profession we've done ourselves a disservice by making vaccines seem like the most important part of what we do each year. It's the physical exam and the history we get that is the most important thing. Everything else helps keep your pet healthy, whether it's parasite control, behavioural consultations, weight management, nutritional management or vaccine protection."

Your best bet? Talk things over with your vet so you can come up with a vaccination schedule that makes sense for your pet.

For more information, visit The Ontario Veterinary Medical Association online.



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