**Why pet vaccinations are important**

Most responsible pet owners know that it is important to take their pets into the surgery once a year for a check up and vaccination – but not everyone really appreciates the vital importance of these annual visits for the long term health of their pets.

It’s all too easy to assume that our pets are going to stay fit and healthy nowadays, and that infectious diseases such as distemper and parvovirus are things of the past, but the reality is not that straightforward. Without the protection that routine vaccinations confer on our cats and dogs, killer diseases such as parvovirus, feline enteritis and many others would still be commonplace and the outlook for our pets would be very different than it is today.

Thanks to modern vaccines, the incidence of many diseases that used to present serious threats to the health of our pets has been greatly reduced and our pets can now expect to live a long and healthy life without the shadow of diseases such as distemper, or feline leukaemia hanging over them. However this does not mean that we can afford to be complacent – far from it.

As with many human diseases such as measles, the bacteria and viruses that cause these diseases will only disappear from circulation if the vast majority of the population is protected. This is the so-called ‘herd immunity’ theory and is the reason why diseases such as parvovirus are still around – not enough dogs are protected to completely eradicate the viruses from circulation, so any unprotected dogs are still at risk of falling ill.

So vaccinating your pets is not just about protecting them against diseases, it is also about protecting all of our pets together. If every single dog and cat were vaccinated regularly, there would be no more parvovirus, no more feline leukaemia and all the other diseases that we can now vaccinate against. Keeping our pets up to date with all the available vaccinations is, like pet insurance, part of responsible pet ownership and should be considered a necessity rather than a luxury.

Given the vital importance of vaccinating pets, it’s important to consider the debate over the safety and efficacy of these vaccines. There have been many issues over the years over the safety of some vaccines, such as the feline leukaemia virus vaccine that has been linked with skin tumours in cats, and also a long running debate over the necessity for vaccines to be given every single year.

On the safety issue, from my experience as a vet, and also from studying the evidence, I think it is clear that with all vaccines currently available for dogs and
cats, the benefits they offer far outweigh any potential risks. So I would have no hesitation in recommending that all pet owners make sure that their pets have all the available vaccinations.

The timing of pet vaccinations does present a slightly less clear picture however. Most people are aware that many human vaccinations only need to be given every 5 or 10 years in many cases, but for their pets they are expected to have injections every 12 months. There are many reasons behind this discrepancy, including differences between people and pets and between the diseases we protect against, and the vaccines we use. It is also worth remembering that some human diseases such as flu do require regular booster injections, so it is not just pets that need repeat vaccinations. And in recent times new research has shown that for some key diseases such as distemper and parvovirus, less regular booster vaccinations are required than was previously though, and now most vets would recommend that only two vaccines (leptospirosis and kennel cough) are given annually to dogs, with the others usually given every 3 years.

Finally, apart from making sure your pets are fully protected against serious infectious diseases, routine boosters also give your vet the chance to give your pet a thorough annual check over which is another vital part of preventative veterinary medicine which keeps your pets fit and healthy for a long happy life.

**Dog Vaccinations:**

- **Leptospirosis** – one of the two diseases still protected by annual vaccines, leptospirosis can cause a wide range of very serious symptoms including kidney and liver damage.
- **Distemper** – this disease has been around for many years and can be fatal as well as causing serious neurological symptoms.
- **Parvovirus** – one of the most common and most serious of the diseases we protect dogs against, parvovirus causes acute vomiting and diarrhoea and is often fatal, especially in puppies.
- **Hepatitis** – a liver infection that is uncommon but very serious.
- **Para-influenza virus** – one of the viruses that causes kennel cough.
- **Bordatella** – a bacterial infection that also causes kennel cough. This vaccine is administered by squirting the vaccine directly into the dog’s nose.
- **Rabies** – this vaccine is only applicable for dogs travelling overseas, and is an essential part of the Pet Passport travel scheme

**Cat Vaccinations:**
• Feline Leukaemia Virus – infection with this virus is one of the biggest causes of death in young cats, so protection is essential particularly for young cats.

• Feline enteritis – another viral infection, with symptoms similar to parvovirus in dogs.

• Flu – although rarely fatal, feline flu is a very serious disease that can cause life-long respiratory problems.

• Chlamydia – this virus causes conjunctivitis in cats but the vaccine is usually only used by breeders and boarding catteries and is not routinely offered to most cats.

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