Choosing a vaccination program for your new puppy or kitten

Dr Clare Middle BVMS, Dip.Ac.,Dip.Hom.

Introduction

I recommend, in the ideal situation, that you book a natural therapies veterinary consultation before any vaccinations have been administered, so I can discuss with you all possible options for maintaining optimum life-long health for your new pup or kitten, at the time the first vaccination is administered. Once a program has been set, all follow-up blood titre testing, or vaccinations if needed, may then be carried out by your local veterinarian, if you prefer.

Immunologically, it is ideal to not give a puppy or kitten injected vaccination until it is about 10 weeks old, which is when its own maternally derived antibodies have reduced, heralding a readiness for its immune system to now be strong enough to cope with either disease or conventional vaccination. This protocol is now routine for many cat breeders. However, most dog breeders vaccinate pups at about 6 weeks and then wean and at 8 weeks, but research has shown that the six week vaccine has worn off by about 10 weeks old, so there is no benefit in giving it, and it can be overstressful to a young immune system to be administering such strong drugs at that age, when nature has still covered the dog by maternal antibody. A vaccination prior to 10 weeks old would only be indicated for an orphaned puppy or if the antibody titre of the mother dog was unknown. It is far better for the first vaccination at 10 weeks to be against only endemic, dangerous disease, which in Western Australia is only parvovirus for puppies, and feline enteritis in cats, or also feline leukaemia for outdoor cats. For dogs, I prefer to use one of the more modern "10 week start" vaccines, which are also registered as only needing a booster every 3 years, or less often according to blood test antibody titre levels. Vaccinating dogs at this age for kennel cough may overload the puppy's immune system. This immune system overload also may mean that the parvovirus component of the vaccination cover will be less effective. Vaccinating at all prior to 10 weeks old can lead to immunosuppression, and is not only unnecessary, provided that the mother dog has antibodies to pass on to the puppies, (which can be verified by having a positive antibody test to parvo during the year prior to having the pups), but also the vaccination will not be effective if the pup still has maternal antibodies. That is why vaccinating at 10 weeks rather than 5-7 weeks, makes much more sense, and also why vaccinating for parvo and distemper only (NOT giving a C4 or C5) also makes a lot of sense. If it necessary to vaccinate for kennel cough to take the dog to training classes or boarding kennels, then use the intranasal vaccine later when needed. The intranasal vaccine is more effective than the injectable one. Vaccinations other than the modern "10 week finish" products need to be repeated at 14-16 weeks of age to be sure all puppies maintain immunity.

If Your Puppy or Kitten Has already been Vaccinated

However, given that most breeders will have already vaccinated your pup at 6-8 weeks of age, the next best time to make an appointment with us is when the pup is 10 to12 weeks old, or at least 4 weeks after the vaccination. We can then still create an individual lifelong vaccination program, which will cover your pet safely against disease, but minimize unnecessary vaccination. Kittens are better given the feline leukaemia vaccination once at about 4 months of age, if they are going to be an outside cat. If they are going to be an indoor cat, and they have had a vaccination at 11 to 12 weeks, this is likely to be sufficient to cover for feline enteritis and cat flu for at least a year.

Orphaned Puppies and Kittens

If the immunity of the mother dog or cat is unknown, or your new puppy or kitten is an orphan, or could not be suckled by the mother for some reason, then earlier conventional vaccination is the best option (ie prior to weaning).

Puppies and Kittens Older than 6 months

Cats and dogs are are immunologically mature by 6 months of age. If vaccination is required (ie if the blood titre test is low), one vaccination only (NOT a series of 2 or 3 vaccines) is needed to raise the blood levels. The blood test can be taken 3 weeks or more after the vaccination, to check its effectiveness. Some pet owners prefer to have this blood test taken while the pet is under anaesthetic being sterilized, during the 6 to 12 month old period. Research has shown that annual boosters are rarely necessary for feline leukaemia and feline enteritis in cats. There is no evidence to show that it is worth vaccinating cats for chlamydia or bordatella at all.

15 month “booster due” time

At 15 months of age when an annual booster may be “due”, antibodies can be checked by blood test, vaccinating only if required, or repeating the blood test every 1 to 3 years depending on the results. Instead you could choose to vaccinate every 3 years (for endemic/dangerous disease only) which has been shown to be the very minimum time likely for it to be necessary, but most dogs and cats are immune for 9 to 11 years after their last vaccination, so blood testing is a more scientific and healthy way to go.

Worldwide

In line with this research, all veterinary schools in USA vaccinate cats and dogs only every 3 years after the first annual booster. Most dogs and cats require booster vaccinations less often, so a three – yearly blood test is the best way to monitor protection, rather than give more frequent unneeded, potentially harmful vaccines. It is best to tailor the vaccine program to the individual animal, making sure that unneeded vaccines are not given to any pet with an existing medical condition such as skin allergy, arthritis, colitis, recurrent infection, epilepsy etc. This protocol is now recommended by the veterinary associations in most western countries, and also by the Australian Veterinary Association and the World Small Animal Association.

Breed Differences

Some breeds are more prone than others to vaccination adverse effects if over-vaccinated, eg Rottweiller, Weimeraner, Staffy, German Shepherd, Siberian Husky puppies, Burmese and Bengal kittens), but any individual can suffer from disease resulting from a vaccine-damaged immune system, showing conditions such as demodectic mange, allergies, infections, urinary tract disease, any autoimmune disease, hypothyroidism, epilepsy, cardiomyopathy and other conditions which have been shown with research to sometimes be linked to overvaccination. If your pet has suffered any of these diseases, it is advisable to consider using only minimum essential vaccination, or consider other natural therapy options for animals in danger of severe reaction if vaccinated.

A natural therapies consultation will cost more than a conventional one, because it takes a lot longer, but you will save money straight away by not paying as much for parasite control, vaccination and processed food, and in the long run you will have a healthier pet, needing fewer trips to the vet.

(Comprehensive research data available on request).