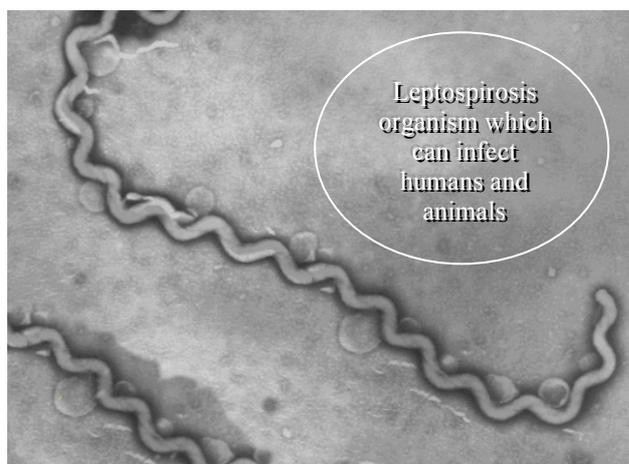


Vaccinating your pet – old hat or still relevant?

Vets continue to tell us how important it is to vaccinate our pets every year. But is this still the right advice for everyone? Good pet care and widespread vaccination has reduced the incidence of many pet diseases that caused common illness and death only a few decades ago. We may also hear worrying stories about vaccines causing bad reactions in a few animals – so what is the best thing to do?

We spoke to local vet Bernice Fitzmaurice MRCVS from Riverside Veterinary Care. She explained that many infectious diseases can persist for a long time in the environment, or may be carried by apparently healthy animals, so it is impossible to eradicate them completely.



‘If a lot of owners stopped vaccinating their pets, we would see a resurgence of some very unpleasant diseases’ she says. ‘Viruses such as Distemper are difficult to treat and may leave a dog permanently disabled. Some of the diseases we vaccinate against in dogs also have a human health implication – for example Leptospira is closely related to Weil’s disease and can cause acute jaundice in dogs and people.’

Do we still need to vaccinate every year?

There is some debate regarding the ideal frequency of pet vaccinations. After a vaccination, an animal develops protective antibodies against the disease. After a certain length of time, the antibody level starts to drop. This period of time varies from one animal to the next, and also varies according to the type of vaccine used.

Vaccine manufacturers have tested their products extensively, and can offer proof that if all animals are vaccinated yearly, the vast majority are protected all of the time.

Can my pet have a blood test to see if he needs vaccinating?

Blood tests for antibody levels to some diseases are now commercially available, but as most pet vaccines contain at least three different organisms, testing is costly.

Separate vaccines for all of the different diseases are not available, as each would need individually testing and licensing – a very expensive procedure.

Your vet will usually recommend a booster shot of a combined vaccine as a safe and cost effective way to gain peace of mind for you and your pet.

What about bad reactions to vaccines?

Any foreign substance introduced to enough pets may cause an unusual reaction in one or two, including substances as varied as grapes, carpet dyes, chocolate, shampoos, wasp stings or antibiotics. Vaccines are no different – there may always be the occasional pet who reacts badly to a booster. There is also research ongoing in the

USA at the moment examining a possible link between certain cat boosters and a type of fibrous tumour.

However, vaccines have been administered to millions of pets worldwide, and the number of serious reactions remains small. It is generally felt that the huge benefit gained by the whole animal community outweighs the small risk of problems.

We still recommend vaccinating your pet yearly.

The viruses that cause infectious diseases change their chemical make-up slightly each year. Vaccine companies perform ongoing research, updating their products so they remain relevant to new and emerging strains. This is comparable to the 'flu vaccines offered each winter to elderly people. As medicine makes new advances all the time, it may eventually become possible to vaccinate pets less often, or to test more easily for antibody levels before deciding which vaccines to use. However, at the moment, even with widespread vaccination, all vets in the UK still regularly see unvaccinated dogs dying of Parvovirus, and their advice remains to re-vaccinate your pet annually for full protection and peace of mind.

