

Vaccine Frequency

Find out what a vet recommends about annual vaccines.

Elaine Wexler-Mitchell, D.V.M.

Q. Should I vaccinate my cat? If so, how often?

Elaine Wexler-Mitchell, D.V.M., says: Having your cat vaccinated annually used to be standard veterinary practice. The veterinary profession, however, has begun to question the need for annual vaccinations.

This is in light of new information regarding the duration of immunity from disease and the adverse vaccine reactions such as tumors that may be associated with vaccination. The American Association of Feline Practitioners created its first vaccine guidelines in 1998. The general recommendations assess an individual cat's risk of infection as the cornerstone to developing that animal's vaccine protocol. The three items the owner and veterinarian need to evaluate are the cat, the cat's environment, and the infectious agents to which the cat may be exposed.

The guidelines also distinguish core and noncore vaccines. A core vaccine is recommended for all cats. There are two core vaccines for cats and it is recommended that all cats get these vaccines. One protects against the feline rhinotracheitis, calici, and panleukopenia viruses and is referred to as FRCP, the other protects against rabies. The general recommendation is to administer the FRCP vaccine to kittens six to eight weeks of age, then every three to four weeks until they are twelve weeks old. A booster should follow one year later, then every three years. The rabies vaccine can be administered to kittens at least twelve weeks old, again one year later, and then every three years. Exceptions exist regarding this protocol, which includes state laws that dictate the requirements for rabies vaccination. A noncore vaccine, such as feline leukemia virus (FeLV), may be appropriate in certain situations, but is not recommended for all cats.

The guidelines address recommended sites of vaccination as well for each of the common vaccines. Different vaccines may best be administered at different sites. Standardized vaccine sites help identify causes and aid in the treatment of adverse reactions. The recommended sites for administering vaccines are: FRCP vaccines over the right shoulder, rabies in the right rear leg, and FeLV vaccines (if needed) in the left rear leg; all administered as far away from the trunk as practical. Vaccinating between the shoulder blades is not recommended because if a tumor arises in this location, it is almost impossible to remove.

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