



## A SHOT IN THE DARK NEW GUIDELINES FOR CANINE VACCINATIONS

By Sasha Futran

Research suggests that the vaccinations we responsibly ensure our dogs receive on a fixed schedule year after year do not necessarily improve immunity to disease.

For decades, we have immunized our dogs against rabies every one to three years and annually for distemper, parvo, adenovirus and other diseases. This annual vaccine is usually referred to as DHLPP or the “five in one” and sometimes “six in one” shot. Other vaccines that are commonly recommended are intended to prevent Parainfluenza and Bordetella, also known as kennel cough. Recently, there has been growing evidence that vaccinations last longer than previously believed and that they may not be entirely benign. One thing is certain, there isn’t universal agreement any longer about which vaccines to give routinely, how often they should be given, and which drugs aren’t necessary at all.

### THE RESEARCH

Since at least the late seventies, some academics and researchers have argued that many of the routine vaccines last much longer than labeled (perhaps a lifetime), some are too short to have much efficacy, and over-

vaccinating may put dogs at risk. These risks may include the potential for compromised immune systems and other adverse reactions.

The average citizen has never heard about these ongoing debates. We are going to be hearing more about this now, however, because veterinary medical associations are beginning to issue new

immunization guidelines. If you think that will clear things up, think again. The guidelines differ on some key points, and many experts say the new guidelines don’t go far enough. What does seem certain is vaccination protocols are in transition and will likely keep changing in the near future.

In the 2001 “Principles of Vaccination,” the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) states: “The one-year revaccination frequency recommendation found on many vaccine labels is based on historical precedent and U.S. Department of Agriculture regulation, not on scientific data.... There is evidence that some vaccines provide immunity beyond one year. Revaccination of patients with sufficient immunity does not add measurably to their disease resistance, and may increase their risk of adverse post-vaccination events.”

In a recent interview, Dr. Donald Klingborg, Associate Dean at the U. C. Davis School of Veterinary Medicine said, “Vaccines are potent medical procedures. Stimulating the immune response has benefits, but it also has risks.” Klingborg, who headed up a three-year study for the AVMA, adds “More animals are alive today because of vaccines than ever before. Puppies need their shots and one year boosters.” After that it all begins to fall apart. “One year is arbitrary,” he says, “ditto three or seven years.”

It is unclear if there are dangers to vaccination, and if so, what exactly these dangers are. A two year study approved by the AVMA Executive Board states, “The body of knowledge [about the effects of over-vaccinating] is increasing but remains insufficient to make general

recommendations.”

Dr. Jane Sykes, assistant professor in small animal internal medicine at U. C. Davis points out that the effectiveness of the vaccines has led to this new information, “We used to be a lot less concerned about the risks because the diseases we were vaccinating against were so widespread and severe that the benefits outweighed the risks.”

### CORE AND NON-CORE VACCINES

Core vaccines are ones that everyone agrees dogs need, although they don’t agree on how frequently. These days “core” means rabies and several of the vaccines contained in the combination DHLPP vaccine: distemper, parvo, and adenovirus. “Non-core” are the rest of the drugs in the DHLPP and a few others, such as vaccinations for Bordetella, Lyme, Leptospirosis, Giardia, Coronavirus, (although some vets who talk about core vaccines, include everything contained in the DHLPP.)

Interviews and a review of literature suggest that there is a wide difference of opinion on the necessity or efficacy of vaccinating against Bordetella, Lyme, Coronavirus and Giardia. Recommendations suggest that if the disease doesn’t exist in your area, or your dog isn’t likely to be exposed, you may not need to vaccinate. Leptospirosis is generally recommended before rainy season if your dog is going on outings in the East Bay Hills, for example, and it doesn’t last a year.

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# THE Woofers Times



Local News For Dog Lovers

EAST BAY EDITION

October 2005 • Volume 1 • Number 7

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## WHAT BAY AREA VETS ARE SAYING

There isn't much agreement about these changes in vaccination recommendations among vets in the Bay Area. Some had already changed their guidelines to once every three years for the core parvo, distemper, and adenovirus; others were not recommending any changes.

Many vets suggest that after puppy shots and boosters at roughly 16 months, the core vaccines need to be given every three years. Some vets suggest staggering the shots so that dogs don't receive them all at once and that older animals that have been vaccinated year after year may not need these vaccines at all, particularly if they aren't exposed to lots of other dogs. Vets that practiced alternative as well as western medicine were more inclined to be concerned about potential over-vaccination and to recommend tests that determine the level of immunity before re-vaccinating after the initial puppy shots and one year booster.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

A number of vets advise that each dog's breed, age, health and physical condition, life style, and risk of exposure all need to be taken into consideration in determining a schedule of vaccinations. If your dog has a lot of exposure to other dogs in parks and kennels, for example, you may want to vaccinate every three years. If it almost never leaves the house, they suggest you can probably vaccinate less frequently.

Talk with your vet about your dog. Find out how knowledgeable and comfortable he or she is discussing the issues involved. Here are some questions to ask:

- What type of vaccines and schedule should my dog be on?
- Why does the vet make those recommendations?
- Why do you consider my dog at risk for that particular disease?
- What does the vaccine prevent?
- How long does it last?
- What are the risks involved in the vaccine?

Vets offer some important advice to dog-owners: If you aren't going in for a regular vaccination, that doesn't mean you can skip the annual visit. Your dog still needs to be seen by a vet at least once a year.

Sorting it all out can be confusing, but educating yourself and discussing vaccinations with your veterinarian is better than a shot in the dark.

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