

When to Vaccinate Your Dog?

Ask the Vet's Leslie Sinclair, DVM explains how often to vaccinate your puppy or adult dog.

Leslie Sinclair, DVM

Q. What vaccines should my dog receive, and when should she receive them?

Leslie Sinclair, DVM says: Vaccination is not the same thing as immunization. Vaccination is the act of injecting the vaccine into your dog. Immunization is the response of your dogs immune system to the vaccine. Your dog is only protected (immunized) to the extent that her immune system is able to process the vaccine and make protective antibodies that recognize the disease-causing virus or bacterium.

Puppies are given a series of vaccines, usually between eight and sixteen weeks of age. If a puppy and her mother are healthy, the puppy receives protective antibodies from her mother when nursing. At around eight weeks of age, those antibodies begin to break down, and the puppys maternal immunity begins to wane. To keep the puppy protected, we give shots at eight weeks. Since any maternal antibodies that linger in the puppys blood will destroy the vaccine, the puppys immune system may not respond to the shot, so she may not receive any protection from it. Another dose of the vaccine is given two to four weeks later, followed by another, until the veterinarian thinks the puppy has become adequately immunized.

Adult dogs who have never been vaccinated should receive a series of vaccinations as well, generally two doses of a vaccine. When a dog is given a new vaccine for the first time, her immune system is slow to react to it, and the immunity it produces is short-lived. The second time she is given the vaccine, her immune system responds more rapidly, and the immunity lasts for a long time, months or even years. Traditionally, veterinary medical experts recommended annual vaccination thereafter to periodically boost the dogs immunity to each disease. Today, we know more about the rare but possible adverse effects of vaccination, and research is underway to determine whether vaccines are given too frequently. Also, not every dog needs every vaccine. In fact, your dog probably doesn't need some available canine vaccines because she may never be exposed to the diseases they are designed to protect against.

Most veterinarians agree on certain core vaccines that every dog needs: Canine distemper virus, canine adenovirus (also known as hepatitis virus), canine parvovirus, and canine parainfluenza virus. Other important vaccines, which should be given based on a dogs risk of infection, include vaccines against leptospirosis bacteria, canine coronavirus, kennel cough (a combination of Bordetella bronchiseptica bacterium and parainfluenza virus), Lyme disease, and the intestinal parasite known as Giardia sp. Depending on your dogs exposure to disease, these vaccines may be unnecessary.

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