

Dog and Cat Vaccination; A New Zealand Perspective

By the Companion Animal Society – a branch of the New Zealand Veterinary Association

GENERAL POLICY STATEMENT

Dog and cat vaccination is an area of veterinary science that has now been under the intense scrutiny by veterinary scientists and recommendations are continually evolving as more studies are completed.

The Companion Animal Society (a special interest branch of the New Zealand Veterinary Association) cannot give black and white recommendations about revaccination intervals for dogs and cats as there are many factors involved and it is the veterinarian's responsibility to take those into account for each individual animal at the time of vaccination.

We recommend that boarding facility operators meet with their local veterinarians to discuss appropriate vaccination policies which will include local disease and environmental knowledge.

Explanation

There is no doubt that companion animal vaccines have helped substantially to reduce the incidence of potentially fatal diseases of dogs and cats. In the early days of vaccination it was considered better to be "safe than sorry" because the diseases were widespread, highly contagious and potentially fatal. Annual vaccination became common practice in most developed countries, including New Zealand. Over time there have been marked advances with substantial improvements in safety and efficacy of vaccines, but vaccination recommendations remained relatively unchanged until recent years.

Although the numbers affected are very small, the reporting of a possible link between vaccination and potentially fatal adverse event in cats in the early 1990's stimulated the debate about the frequency of revaccination of adult cats and dogs. The length of time a vaccinated animal is considered to have protective immunity against disease is known as duration of immunity (DOI). Duration of immunity studies have demonstrated that some vaccines provide solid immunity for much longer than 1 year which effectively allows for less frequent vaccination.

Recently international veterinary bodies have put forward guidelines for companion animal vaccination protocols based on an individual pet's needs including disease risk factors, health status and the specific vaccine administered. Veterinarians can then take these recommendations together with their knowledge of immunology and scientific evidence and make the best recommendation for their patients. There are well informed cat and dog owners who would rather not repeatedly vaccinate their animals if it is not entirely necessary, and appreciate this approach. The bottom line is there can no longer be 'blanket' recommendation for vaccination and so veterinarians' recommendations may vary slightly depending on patient assessment and what vaccine they administer.

We appreciate this can be confusing for both pet owners and cattery / kennel operators trying to establish guidelines for their clients and indeed as more scientific information becomes available there may be even more changes. To add to the confusion a few individuals will have a limited response to vaccination or not even respond at all; some vaccines help reduce the severity of a disease rather than provide complete protection and new strains of virus may develop that current vaccines do not protect against. Administering vaccines more frequently will not improve this. Kennel cough in dogs may involve a combination of multiple viruses and bacteria and the herpes virus can chronically infect cats and flare up under stress to produce symptoms regardless of vaccination status.

For some diseases antibody titre level in response to vaccination correlates well with protective immunity and these may be offered in overseas laboratories. However, low titres do not necessarily correspond to susceptibility and in some diseases cell-mediated immunity may play a more important role in clinical protection. Local knowledge of disease challenge is an important aspect in decision making by veterinarians; in New Zealand the practice of obtaining titres for individual disease risk assessments is generally not practical at this time.

However, there is no doubt boarding facilities can provide 'peace of mind' for owners while they are away and vaccinations play an important role in this, together with good clean facilities, accurate pet monitoring and the provision of a separate area and veterinary attention if a pet shows any sign of being unwell.

Communication between cattery / kennel operator, veterinarian and pet owner is extremely important. Below are *general* guidelines regarding vaccinations for cats and dogs followed by specific recommendations offered to those operating boarding facilities.

General vaccination guidelines

- Only vaccinated dogs and cats should be admitted to boarding facilities.
- All cats and dogs should be vaccinated against what are classified as the 'core' antigens; for dogs these are Canine Parvovirus, Canine Distemper Virus and Canine Adenovirus (hepatitis) and for cats they are Feline Panleukopaenia and the two upper respiratory viruses, Feline Calicivirus and Feline Herpesvirus.
 - Most puppies and kittens will be given a series of vaccines containing core antigens starting at 6-8 weeks of age and finishing at 12-16 weeks of age followed by a booster at 12-16 months of age.
 - From this point many core vaccines will protect for longer than a year and some vaccines are registered for 2 or 3 yearly revaccination intervals.
 - Feline respiratory disease (snuffles / cat flu) is highly contagious. Unfortunately, vaccines cannot offer complete protection against this disease, only relative protection. Vaccination may not protect against cats becoming carriers and carriers of this disease can become ill when stressed. Your veterinarian can give advice regarding the best vaccination policy for your cattery.
- Vaccination with 'non-core' antigens should be based on veterinary advice. The duration of immunity for most 'non-core' antigens is shorter and the revaccination recommendation is often yearly.
 - Leptospirosis may be an issue only in certain areas; yearly vaccination is recommended. Discuss the prevalence in your area with your veterinarian.

- Kennel cough is a highly contagious disease and most likely to be a problem where a number of dogs are in close proximity, so a boarding kennel environment is considered to be a relatively high risk environment for this disease. Annual vaccination is required.
- Time interval from vaccination to boarding:
 - If a cat or dog has previously completed an initial vaccination programme and is within the timeframe for revaccination recommended by the veterinarian, there is no requirement to wait for a booster vaccination to take effect.
 - All previously unvaccinated dogs or cats including puppies and kittens should have completed an initial vaccination program at least 2 weeks prior to entering a boarding facility.
 - Specific vaccines may have specific recommendations regarding the time required from vaccination to clinical protection.
- The veterinarian should note on the certificate for each vaccine when the animal is due for revaccination. All vaccination certificates should contain:
 - animal details
 - owner details
 - vaccine details
 - date of vaccination
 - clinic details
 - veterinarian details and signature
 - revaccination date

Specific recommendations offered to kennels / catteries

1. In collaboration with your chosen veterinary advisor(s), develop a well-reasoned, science-based policy concerning your revaccination requirements. Take your time and do it properly. For example, make time to discuss your draft policy document with local veterinary practitioners. Once it has been formulated, make sure that all kennel / cattery employees understand and apply the policy consistently.

2. When examining a vaccination certificate, check that the animal has been vaccinated against the necessary diseases. Then check to see how far into the future the veterinarian says the animal should be protected against these diseases. In a world of changing revaccination recommendations, this is the most important information on the vaccination certificate. Nowadays, vaccine manufacturers do not all make the same duration of immunity claims. This situation is likely to become even more complicated in future. Trust what the veterinarian writes on the certificate about protection into the future.

3. Avoid setting your own hard-and-fast rules about when the animal must have received its last injection(s). Your rules might contradict vaccine manufacturers' instructions or local veterinary practice science-based policies. Such rules might also require your clients' animals to receive unnecessary 'extra' vaccinations, which are not entirely without risk.