

The Importance of Vaccinating Your Pet

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Alright, folks, let's talk about my favourite animal-related topic... *responsible pet ownership*! What does it mean to be a responsible pet owner? You may remember from my previous entry that we are concerned with an animal's Five Freedoms – to be a responsible pet owner is to ensure you are providing the Five Freedoms to your furry (or scaly, or feathery) friend. I want to draw your attention to one of the Five Freedoms:

3) Freedom from Pain, Injury, or Disease by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.

Providing your pet with regular veterinary care is one way that you can ensure you are satisfying this third freedom. An annual vet check-up will include necessary vaccinations, vaccine boosters (for continued effectiveness), and deworming. These vaccines will protect your pet from dangerous diseases by preparing their immune system to recognize and respond to a virus, should they be exposed (which is very likely – parvovirus, for example, can survive in an environment for very long periods of time). The vaccine does this by exposing the body to a *weakened* or *dead* form of the virus, prompting the body to form *antibodies* to fight it off.

I won't pretend there isn't some controversy around vaccines; many people understandably question how safe vaccines really are for your pet. The reality is that, as with any medical procedure, adverse reactions to vaccines can occur. The most common side effects include fever, soreness, swelling, and lethargy – with the rarer being serious allergic reactions. For this reason, veterinarians are only able to vaccinate healthy animals to reduce the risk of reactions.

Despite the existence of these risks, the risks of *not* vaccinating your pet are far greater – leaving your pet vulnerable to a potentially deadly disease is never the preferable option. Everyday activities such as bringing your pet to boarding kennels, dog parks, and grooming services can mean exposing your pet to harmful illnesses (in fact, many pet-related businesses require that your pet be vaccinated to receive service at all). Through consistent vaccination practices, however, the risk of animals contracting these diseases has been greatly reduced.



Tyrion: Found safe shelter on November 16th, 2017 and a happy home on December 14th, 2017. Tyrion, like all animals that come into our care, was provided with life-saving vaccinations.

- Through widespread availability and implementation of rabies vaccines, many countries have reduced the incidence of rabies by over 95% in humans and 98% in dogs. ([World Health Organization](http://www.who.int))

Now that you understand the importance of vaccines, let's talk details. You may be wondering what vaccines your pet actually needs, and how often. Well, wonder no longer!

Your pet will require a set of *core vaccines* (defined by the [Canadian Veterinary Medical Association](#) as those for "*diseases that are widespread, cause serious illness, and/or are highly contagious*"). Each vaccine must follow a schedule that determines what your pet receives and when; some vaccinations are as simple as a one-time dose, and others require regular boosters or additional doses as your pet reaches maturity milestones (think "puppy shots"). Your vet may also recommend some *non-core* vaccines, based on factors such as age, medical history, and lifestyle.

Q: What vaccines can I expect my pet to be given?

Because core vaccines vary by region, the only way to know which ones are required for your critter is to speak to your vet. At the very least, you can expect your dog to be vaccinated for rabies, distemper, and parvovirus. Your cat will likely be vaccinated for rabies, panleukopenia (feline distemper), calicivirus, and feline viral rhinotracheitis.

Q: When should my pet be vaccinated?

Your pet's vaccination schedule will vary depending on a variety of factors. For example, vaccinating an adult pet for the first time will entail a different schedule than if you have them vaccinated as early in life as possible. A good rule of thumb for adult cats and dogs is to bring them to a vet for their routine vaccinations on an annual basis. Puppies and kittens will require regular vet checkups every few weeks starting from the moment they are weaned off their mother's milk (anywhere from 6 to 8 weeks) to the age of about 16 weeks. Call your local vet to arrange these appointments.

Titre Testing: An Expert's Take

I sat down with Meaghan West, a Registered Veterinary Technologist at Arlington Animal Hospital here in Saskatoon. She says that while vaccinating is important, we should also be talking about *titre tests* – a simple process to check if repeat boosters are even necessary for your pet.

Once a pet is vaccinated, their chance of being able to defend themselves against a deadly disease is greatly improved. Some vaccines, however, do require repeat vaccinations and boosters. This is where titre tests come in – as they help determine whether these additional vaccines are required!

A titre test is done by taking a blood sample from your pet and measuring the level of antibodies in the blood for a particular disease. The level of antibodies (the *titre*) will determine whether your pet is considered adequately protected or not; if the titre level is too low, re-vaccination may be required to ensure your pet is sufficiently protected. If the level is high enough, re-vaccination isn't necessary.

Did You Know? Titre testing is also done in humans! I recently completed my rabies vaccination series, and the nurse recommended I get my titre levels tested approximately every 2 years to ensure the vaccines are still doing their job. If the titre test indicates not enough antibodies are present, we will know I require additional vaccinations to continue my protection against rabies.



Pandora: Found safe shelter on January 20th, 2018 and a happy home on February 2nd, 2018.

Not only do vaccines ensure that you are providing adequate care to your pet as a responsible owner, but they're also a true investment in your pet's health – the cost of routine vaccinations is very low, compared to the very expensive-to-treat and often fatal illnesses your pet is at risk of contracting, should they go unvaccinated. Think of it this way – *if you can do something to help prevent your pet suffering from an expensive and devastating illness – why wouldn't you?*

One frustration I've heard from pet owners about vaccinating their pets is that they do not have convenient access to vet care where they

live, as many communities in Saskatchewan are isolated enough to not have a local veterinarian providing these services. I grew up in rural Saskatchewan, so I understand this concern – but I encourage you to look further into options that may be available to you without your knowledge. I remember, every year, a vet from a nearby town would hold a mobile vaccine clinic and make their rounds to our smaller communities. They would set up in the lobby of our curling rink and we were able to easily bring in our farm cats for their annual vaccines – we were in and out in 15 minutes!

Remember what we tell our adopters:

"It is cheaper to vaccinate your animal than to treat diseases."

Now that you've had the opportunity to understand what vaccines are, and their value, I hope you will feel comfortable and confident with providing your pet with this crucial aspect of care. I'm often one to "leave it to the experts", but it's always best to be informed and understanding of the care that your vet can provide to your pet – and why it's so crucial to their wellbeing.

