

# Time for Vaccines?

*Five tips to help you advocate for the best vaccination protocol for your dog.*

BY MARDI RICHMOND, MA, CPDT-KA

**I** am surprised at how frequently the subject of vaccinations comes up with my dog-loving friends. We often talk about the pros and cons of certain vaccines and look for the latest information. We struggle to understand the complexities, and to sort out the facts from the controversy.

When it comes to vaccines, being an advocate for our dogs may be the most important thing we can do. Being an advocate doesn't mean being an expert, but it does mean taking action. These tips can help you take action that supports your dog's good health.

**1 ACKNOWLEDGE THE BENEFITS AND THE RISKS OF VACCINES.** You don't need to know everything about infectious diseases, and you don't need to know every possible risk associated with immunization. But you do need to know that there are both benefits and risks. It is just not as simple as "Vaccines save lives," or "Vaccines can make your dog sick."

"Over-vaccination is just as risky as not being protected," says Evelyn Sharp, DVM, of My Personal Vet in Santa Cruz, California. "Some of the risks associated with vaccines include autoimmune diseases and anaphylaxis." But Dr. Sharp emphasizes that you can minimize these risks, while still protecting your dog.

To evaluate the risks and benefits, consider the need for a vaccine *each time* it is due. Vaccines should not be "routine." Understand that even the core vaccines may or may not be appropriate for a specific dog, at a specific time.

**2 TEAM UP WITH YOUR VET.** Even if you choose a vaccine clinic or to administer vaccines yourself, a discussion with your veterinarian *first* may help you make the best decisions. Your vet will likely know the diseases prevalent

in your area, your dog's overall health, genetic risk factors, and more. You may want to ask:

- ✓ What vaccines do you recommend, and why?
- ✓ Are there disease risks that are unique to your area?
- ✓ What are the possible side effects of the vaccines?
- ✓ Does the veterinary clinic offer titer tests (to determine whether your dog may already possess sufficient immunity to the most common diseases)?

**3 CONSIDER YOUR DOG'S LIFESTYLE.** Your dog's lifestyle can influence disease risk. Your vet may want to know things like:

- ✓ Where you walk your dog or if you go to dog parks.
- ✓ If your dog goes to dog shows, is boarded or visits doggy day care. (If your dog is a regular at doggy day care, you and your vet may discuss the pros and cons of bordetella – plus, it may be required by the day care facility. But if your dog is never boarded and does not participate in dog activities, he or she may not need that particular vaccine).

**4 CHECK OUT TITER TESTS.** Titer tests are both accurate and cost effective, according to Dr. Sharp. "One newer test checks for antibodies in your dog's blood for parvovirus, distemper, and infectious hepatitis, and the cost is much less than some of the older titer tests." A titer test can tell you:

- ✓ Whether your dog or puppy had a positive immune response to a recent vaccine (basically, did the vaccine do its job?)
- ✓ Whether your dog has antibodies (showing immunity) from a previous vaccine (lacking these, you should consider a booster).
- ✓ Whether a newly adopted dog has been previously vaccinated.

**5 REMEMBER, WITH VACCINES, ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL.** Each dog has his or her own risks when it comes to disease and to immunization. Plus, circumstances and risks can change. A decision you made for your dog last year may not be the best decision this year.

It is a stretch to think that each of us (no matter how many conversations we have about vaccines with our dog-loving friends!) can be an expert on what our dog needs when it comes to vaccines. But by asking questions, talking with our veterinarians about our particular dog, and considering all options, we can be our dog's advocate. 🐾

*Mardi Richmond, MA, CPDT-KA, is a writer and trainer living in Santa Cruz, California, with her partner and a wonderful heeler-mix named Chance.*

