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Annual Vaccinations

Annual vaccinations – are they necessary ?

For the many years the veterinary profession has been staunch advocates of a yearly vaccination protocol for dogs and cats, and this has been fundamentally driven by the pharmaceutical companies that produce the vaccines. The vaccines that have been produced have only ever given a 12 month efficacy statement, and it is this fact that has under-pinned the science of annual vaccination.

In more recent times, efficacy testing on vaccines has been heavily researched in the USA, and has led to some contentious findings. By performing antibody tests (which are available from your local vet), it is possible to determine if a pet has adequate protection from the diseases we vaccinate against. The US studies demonstrated that many pets had lifelong immunity from the first few vaccines, and in the worst case, most were protected for at least 3-5 years. This information was relevant to the very nasty groups of diseases – distemper, hepatitis and parvovirus, but did not prove true for the kennel cough vaccines, which struggle to last even 12 months. When this information is combined with an ever increasing body of evidence that links over vaccination to a number of current diseases (feline vaccine sarcoma, canine hypothyroidism), it has created much debate about the ethical nature of advising yearly vaccines.

When challenged on the question of why vaccines have only been given a 12 month efficacy level, the answer has been that that was all the pharmaceutical companies were required to demonstrate to gain registration for the vaccines. The fact that they last much longer was not deemed relevant.

In light of this new information, Australian vets are now able to advise their clients to safely adopt a 3 yearly vaccination protocol for distemper, hepatitis and parvovirus. Kennel Cough vaccines must still be given annually, but this mainly applies to dogs that go to kennels on an annual basis. Remember, kennel cough is not a deadly disease, and most dogs will recover from it with no treatment at all. There is now also a registered 3 yearly vaccine, which has slightly higher levels of antigen. But the reality is, your regular yearly vaccine is going to be very adequate for 3 years regardless.

At my clinic in Castlemaine, I have been advising 3 yearly vaccinations for over 12 years, and have not had a single problem. I recommend puppy and kitten vaccines (6 and 12 weeks) and the first annual vaccination, then every 3 yrs. We advise kennel cough vaccines only for dogs that are going to be kenneled within 6 months. I also offer antibody testing for those clients that just want to know if their pets really do need a top up vaccination. I also advise not vaccinating older pets (over 10-12 yrs old) if they have a good history of vaccination –in my experience, true acute vaccine reactions are rare, but chronic diseases that “may” be triggered, or aggravated, by vaccinations are more common in older pets.

Dr Bruce Syme

“The natural choice for exceptionally healthy pets.”