



To vaccinate or not to vaccinate?

This is a question that many have difficulty answering given the diverse points of view floating around.

Research has shown that vaccines have a much longer term of effectiveness against disease than previously thought. Subsequently, recommendations on the frequency of vaccination for our dogs and cats have changed and many of them no longer require annual boosters.

A vaccination is a means of giving the body a much less severe form of a disease than it could potentially contract. This primes the immune system to be prepared for the disease thus enabling the body to mount an effective enough defence that the animal doesn't become severely ill when exposed to the real thing.

Any vaccine is only as good as the host's response to it and this requires an animal to have a healthy immune system. This is a big reason why vaccines sometimes fail to provide immunity.

Further to this, although we can do antibody titre tests to get an idea, it is very difficult to accurately quantify how well a vaccination has worked or how protected an animal is against any given disease. For this reason predicting the best vaccination protocol is an educated guess and previously most vet's best guess was to use these vaccines annually as suggested by vaccine manufacturers, whose label recommendations we are obliged to adhere to.

Currently not all vaccine manufacturers have changed the label claims on their vaccines to allow for longer duration of immunity. Vaccine manufacturers who have adapted their protocols for dogs and cats now recommend initial puppy and kitten vaccination followed by a booster one to three years later and then three yearly boosters of the core diseases that we vaccinate against. These are parvovirus, distemper, hepatitis and parainfluenza for dogs and calici (rhinotracheitis), herpes and panleukopenia viruses for cats.

As with any medication, there are potential negative effects associated with vaccines such as vaccine reactions. There is also evidence that over vaccination contributes to the development of autoimmune conditions and other degenerative diseases.

Homeopathic vaccines are available but don't carry the scientific weight that our conventional vaccines do in terms of efficacy, however negative reactions to these gentle remedies aren't an issue.

From a holistic point of view, the best support that we can give our animals' immune system is to nourish them properly, live cleanly and respect the environment that we live in. Vaccination has its place, but each animal needs to be assessed individually. Their owners must be educated on the benefits of a vaccination protocol versus potential negatives. Pet owners should then come to an informed decision that they're comfortable with and ideally have the support of their vet.