



If you have a question for the Best Friends team of vets, send an email to [editor@bestfriends.org](mailto:editor@bestfriends.org). Please type "Ask the Vet" in the subject line. For timely medical advice, please consult your veterinarian as soon as possible.

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## Ask the Vet

with Dr. Michael Dix, Best Friends Medical Director

**Q:** We've been hearing a lot of buzz lately about vaccines. So, when it comes to vaccinating our pets, should we? Shouldn't we? And how often?

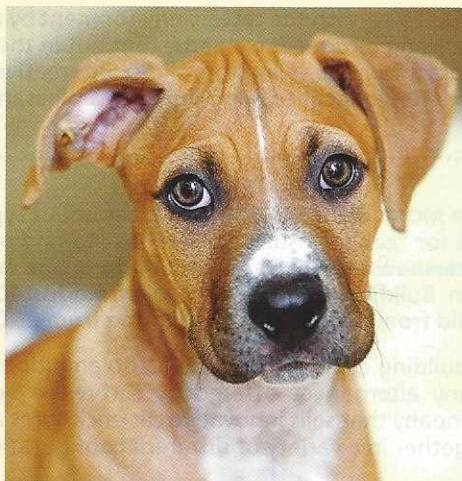
**A:** Whether or not to vaccinate and how often to vaccinate are among the most debated questions in veterinary medicine today. It used to be so easy: You went to your veterinarian once a year, got your pets their shots and whatever meds they might need, and went on your way. Now, many prominent veterinarians are saying that animals do not need yearly vaccines and that the vaccines may be causing more harm than good.

### The great debate

Some veterinarians argue that vaccines can lead to immune-mediated conditions, cancers and organ-related illnesses. The most studied and well-documented example of this is vaccine-induced fibrosarcomas in cats due to the FeLV vaccine. The result has been changes in vaccine recommendations for cats, including how often and where to give the vaccines. The other concerns are not as well documented, but significant correlations have been made between vaccines and other illnesses.

The flip side of the argument is that vaccines have greatly decreased the amount of infectious viral diseases we see. Before vaccines became prominent, veterinarians spent a lot of time working with horrific infectious diseases, such as distemper, rabies, panleukopenia and parvovirus. We certainly still see those diseases, but much less frequently. Overall, vaccines have improved the health of our pet population.

My opinion on the matter falls in the middle. I think vaccines are very important for the overall health of our pets, but I think they need to be used judiciously. When it comes to vaccines, there is also a difference between pets living in homes and those who are in shelters or sanctuaries. For animals who do not yet have homes, vaccines are crucial to maintaining their health and the health of any new arrivals. There are very few reasons to not regularly vaccinate this population of animals.



### So many variables

The most straightforward variable in determining whether or not to vaccinate your pets is to comply with local law. For instance, most communities require that dogs (and cats, too) be vaccinated for rabies. This is a public health issue because rabies is zoonotic, which means it is a disease that can spread from animals to people, and is not curable. The only reason not to vaccinate for rabies is if your pet has a disease that the vaccine may cause

to worsen. Talk to your veterinarian about whether your pet has a condition that makes rabies vaccination undesirable. Unfortunately, your unvaccinated pet will not be exempt from rabies quarantine laws if he or she bites someone.

Do your pets go to day care or dog parks or spend time in kennels? If so, they will be exposed to more diseases, so it is important to maintain a regular vaccine schedule. Some places require verification that your pet is protected. They certainly care about your pet, but they also require vaccines because they don't want other animals to pick up diseases at their place of business.

Another important variable is your pets' lifestyle. Does your dog encounter wildlife or play in areas where wildlife is frequently spotted? If the answer is yes, vaccinating for leptospirosis may be important. Is your feline an indoor/outdoor cat? Cats who roam around outdoors can come across diseases like FeLV and calicivirus, and should be protected against them. On the other hand, if your cat never goes outside, you just need to do the rabies vaccine. (Rabies vaccination is important for both legal reasons and because bats, which can get into most building structures, are a common carrier of rabies.) I recommend talking with your veterinarian about what your pets' lifestyle is and how to tailor a vaccine schedule for them.

### How often?

One aspect of vaccines that I feel strongly about is that most animals do not need vaccines every year. (There are exceptions to this, of course, but they are not that common.) I recommend doing the puppy and kitten series, boosting them in a year, and then going to every three years for vaccines — or only rabies for indoor-only animals. A lot of studies have shown that the animals have immunity from the diseases they are vaccinated against for at least three years after their first booster. This immunity may be even longer, but for now, I still recommend doing the vaccines every three years. And when pets become elderly, most vaccines (except rabies) can be stopped, unless there are factors that make vaccinating necessary.

Some people who are nervous about over-vaccinating will run titers to the diseases that we vaccinate for. A titer measures the amount of antibodies (protective proteins) that are present to specific diseases. Having a lot of these antibodies does not mean pets are definitively protected, but they typically are. Titers can be expensive and can take several days, so many people do not have them done and just opt for the vaccine instead.

However, there's a new product that will allow your veterinarian to do in-house titers to canine distemper, adenovirus and parvovirus. The product, called VacciCheck, is a less expensive titer that can be done while you and your pet wait. It involves taking some blood from your dog and then the veterinarian or nurse runs the test, which takes around 20 minutes to complete. We have used this test several times at Best Friends and I have found it useful because it made me more comfortable about not vaccinating dogs who I felt didn't need it. 🐾

**Vaccines are an important consideration for our pets' general health care. Whether a particular vaccine is right for your pet is a discussion you should have with your veterinarian.**



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