



VAX-Testing: A Program to Aid in Decision-Making About Pet Vaccinations

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Annual Vaccinations—Standard Practice for Many Years

Since the early 1960s, annual vaccination of companion animals has been standard practice. It was always a fairly straight-forward decision: if there was any reason to doubt the immune status of animals facing probable exposure to infection, it was less expensive and easier for owners to simply re-vaccinate than to attempt to monitor antibody response and vaccinate only when titers were below a certain limit¹.

In 1989, the AVMA Council on Biologics and Therapeutics provided vaccination guidelines emphasizing the maintenance of high titers through annual re-vaccinations, essentially following label recommendations². But within the last few years, the necessity and the safety of annual vaccination in dogs and cats has come into question, prompting reconsideration of the need for annual vaccination protocols^{3,4,5,6}.

The Necessity of Annual Vaccinations—An Emerging Concern

Most everyone is in agreement that vaccination is an essential component of a preventive health care plan for animals. Vaccines not only protect individual animals from infectious disease; they also help to maintain a safe level of immunity in animal populations and herds, thus minimizing transmittal of disease.

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But the question of how often to vaccinate is a complex issue for which there is no general agreement at this time. Due to recent studies warning of the potential risks in over-vaccinating, some veterinary practices, associations, and agencies have begun recommending vaccinating less frequently than once each year. But this poses the potential problem of whether or not to honor label recommendations that specify annual vaccinations. It has been suggested that veterinarians could be liable if licensed vaccines are not administered according to label guidelines⁷, and clients who are aware of these guidelines may be concerned that regulations are not being followed. A significant part of this dilemma is due to the fact that vaccine manufacturers have not been required to determine the duration of immunity afforded by vaccines before distributing them.

At the same time, an increasing number of owners do not want to vaccinate their pets if they don't have to. They reason that if repeated vaccinations are not required of human beings, why should they be required of animals? There is also legitimate concern about the potential for adverse reactions that vaccinations have been known to cause. This is leading animal owners to think more seriously about whether vaccination is really necessary, which increases the pressure on veterinarians to come up with an answer to the question of how frequently vaccinations should be administered.

To complicate matters, some veterinarians suggest that delaying vaccination beyond one year is premature owing to the lack of definitive studies on the duration of immunity⁷. This thinking is in line with clients who prefer to 'play it safe' and vaccinate routinely. Since the duration of immunity question is not definitively established, some practitioners are dealing with this uncertainty by using titer screening as a more methodical way of assessing the need for vaccination.

