

# Pets Vaccinations: Safe or Sorry?

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Suddenly, taking Rover and Puff to get their shots requires more thought: Many pet lovers and vets have become worried that routine vaccinations may be dangerous.

"This is a hot topic in the profession," says Donald J. Klingborg, who's leading an investigation into vaccination risks for the American Veterinary Medical Association. The results and recommendations will be available late this year.

No one says every vaccinated pet will develop problems, but there are plenty of cautionary tales of autoimmune diseases, aggressive cancers, chronic illnesses and even deaths. Veterinarians tell pet owners to talk over their concerns with their vets to make a plan that offers the most protection and the least risk.

Jenny Nelson, a Kansas State University veterinary graduate student wishes she could do what some owners do: Vaccinate only when a pet's immunity is low. To determine immune status, blood is drawn and tested for various antibodies. But at \$20 to \$55 a pop, it's outside a student budget.

Instead, with the support of her vet, Nelson began a modified schedule of shots for her dogs: Holly Bear, a red Australian shepherd; Rowan, a blue Australian shepherd; and Oliver; a golden retriever. Puppy vaccinations stretched out to double the time between shots, and she gives the once-every-three-years rabies vaccinations instead of annual boosters. Nelson knows this tactic won't work for everyone. Military families, for example, must stick to annual boosters or risk leaving their pets behind if they get transferred.

No long-term studies support the practice of annual boosters, says experts at Colorado State University. Worse, rabies vaccine labeled as one-year strength might actually be three-year strength, meaning pets might get much higher doses than they need.

Toy breed dogs are especially prone to vaccine reactions, with responses so strong they can be fatal. Veterinary schools already recommend a modified vaccination schedule for the tiny canines.

"Most pet owners don't realize that no vaccination is 100% effective. And there's no clear information on how long they last in individual animals," says Amy Shojai, the author of pet health books including *New Choices in Natural Healing for Dogs and Cats* (Rodale, \$29.95). "While some will offer virtually lifelong immunity with one shot, others last less than a year or don't prevent disease --- they only reduce the severity if the pet does get sick," Shojai now vaccinates her Siamese cat, Seren, less frequently.

Nevertheless, until the official study of vaccine safety is finished, lead investigator Klingborg says that "vaccinations do much more good than harm."