

Vaccinating your cat



There are a number of highly infectious and potentially fatal diseases which can affect your cat. However, for many of these conditions there is a simple protection in the form of vaccinations. Ensuring that your cat completes an initial course of vaccinations and then receives regular booster jabs is important if you want to keep your cat fit and healthy.

How do vaccines work?

Most vaccines are given by injection under the skin. A few vaccines may be given as a spray up your cat's nose. They all work by training the white blood cells in your cat's body how to recognise and attack the viruses or bacteria contained in the vaccine. This should prevent infection with that particular bug if your cat is in contact with it again. Current vaccines fall into two main categories:

- **Live vaccines:** these contain a strain of the bug which has been altered so that it cannot cause disease but does stimulate immunity
- **Dead vaccines:** the bug in these has been killed by heat or chemicals

Each type has their pros and cons - live vaccines generally give better and longer-lasting protection but they can sometimes cause more side effects. Live vaccines are not recommended for certain groups of cats, such as pregnant females.

Which vaccinations does my cat need?

There are many vaccinations available for cats but not all cats need all the vaccinations every year. Nowadays, vaccines are classed as either "core" or "non-core". In general, "core" vaccines are considered those that should be given routinely to most cats because of the highly infectious, widespread distribution and potential severity of the disease. "Non-core" vaccines are considered those for diseases against which, not every animal needs to be protected. The decision to use a "non-core" vaccine should be based on assessment of individual lifestyle and risk.

Lifestyle influencers are key to the risks of infectious disease and useful questions to consider include:

- What is the age and background of your cat?
- Where and how does he/she live?
- Are there any other pets in the home?
- Does your cat live in an urban or rural area?
- Will your cat stay in a boarding cattery or attend cat shows?
- Does your cat live in a multicat household?
- Is your a 'stay at home' cat or a gregarious, outdoor social type?

These questions may have a direct relevance to determining the appropriate vaccination programme for your cat.

Almost regardless of the individual lifestyle of a cat, UK vets recommend vaccination against herpesvirus, calicivirus and panleucopenia - these are generally seen as "core" vaccines. The vast majority of UK cats spend some time outside and are therefore at risk of catching feline leukaemia. As a result, many UK experts regard leukaemia (FeLV) vaccination as "core", and it is certainly recommended. However, there are a number of cats that never go outdoors and so can never encounter other cats that carry the leukaemia virus. If your cat is an indoor cat discuss the vaccination issue with you vet.

What vaccinations can my cat have?

Feline Panleucopenia (also called Feline distemper or Feline Infectious Enteritis)

- Before the development of a safe vaccine, Feline Panleucopenia was one of the biggest causes of death in cats. It is particularly dangerous for kittens and young cats, when severe vomiting and diarrhoea can cause fatal dehydration within 2-3 days of symptoms starting. The virus is spread in infected faeces (droppings) and it can survive for long periods in the environment.

Cat Flu (also called Feline viral rhinotracheitis, caused by Feline calicivirus and herpesvirus)

- Nearly all cases of respiratory disease in cats are caused by one of two viruses; herpesvirus and calicivirus. Cat Flu is only rarely fatal except in very young or old cats and those which are already ill with some other disease. The effects are the same as in human flu - sneezing, a runny nose and

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eyes - but mouth ulcers may also occur. Once infected a cat may carry the virus for a long time and pose a risk to any unvaccinated cat it meets. Cats carrying the virus may not have any symptoms or may have mouth ulcers or 'snotty noses' which never get better. The protection given by vaccination may be short-lived and sometimes your cat may need to be vaccinated at six month intervals.

Feline Leukaemia (FeLV)

- Feline Leukaemia is probably the most important viral disease in cats. Not all cats that are infected with the virus get the disease. But, in those that do, it is almost always fatal and treatment can only prolong the cat's life. The disease destroys the cat's defences against other diseases and may cause fatal cancers. The virus is spread by direct contact with other cats. So any cat that goes outside or mixes with other cats is at risk.

Chlamydia

- Chlamydia is a disease which causes painful inflammation (conjunctivitis), ulcers and discharge from the eyes. It may cause infertility in some female cats. Young kittens with the disease may have sore or runny eyes from a few weeks old. It is mainly a problem where large numbers of cats live together and once a cattery is affected, the disease often keeps coming back. Cats living on their own are at low risk of catching the disease. This disease can be treated with a long course of antibiotics.

Rabies

- Vaccination against Rabies is compulsory in many countries because of the risk of passing this horrible fatal disease to humans. Vaccination is unnecessary for cats in those countries which are free of rabies - the UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and Japan - except in those animals which are going to be exported abroad. Cats in the UK may now be vaccinated against rabies for travel to some European countries and can return to the UK with waiver of the 6 month quarantine period under certain prescribed conditions. Contact your vet for details if you plan to travel abroad with your cat.

When should my cat be vaccinated?

Kittens are protected against many infectious diseases through compounds called antibodies, which they receive in the first few hours from their mother's milk (colostrum). Early vaccination is pointless because these antibodies prevent vaccines working properly. However, by about seven weeks the immunity provided by the mother begins to wear off. Some kittens do not have good protection from their mother and these may benefit from earlier vaccination. For most of the above diseases, kittens should be given their first vaccination at about 8-9 weeks of age and then given a second vaccination at about twelve weeks. Until your kitten has received all its injections and for a few days after, it should not mix with other cats unless you can be certain that they are free of disease.

Why do cats need repeat vaccinations?

Most vaccination courses start with two separate injections about three weeks apart. This course must be completed before your kitten is fully protected by the vaccine. The protection given by most vaccines wears off in time and at different rates for each particular vaccine. The level of infection in the environment of many of the diseases against which we vaccinate is low. This means that it is unlikely that a vaccinated animal will come into contact with the wild strain virus sufficiently frequently to receive natural boosts to its immunity.

Repeated vaccination is necessary to maintain adequate antibody titres in these cases. If your cat has not been given a booster for more than two or three years, your vet may think it is safer to start from scratch with a new course of injections. It is particularly important to make sure boosters are up to date in cats that fight regularly with other cats. Most catteries will insist on seeing proof of regular vaccinations before looking after your cat.

How often are vaccines given?

Protection afforded by vaccination is not necessarily lifelong. The duration of immunity varies depending on the circumstances of the individual animal and the vaccine used. Long-term protection afforded by vaccinations varies according to the manufacturer and the antigens contained. This varies according to the disease for which protection is required and the brand of vaccine used so ask your vet to explain the specific requirements for your cat.



Do vaccines always work?

The quality of vaccines available today is very high but occasionally an individual cat may not get the full protection from the vaccine. This may be because the cat was already ill or was stressed when it was vaccinated and its immune system wasn't working properly. Your vet will examine your cat before vaccination and if any signs of illness are detected will delay vaccination until your cat is well again.

Can vaccinations be dangerous?

Often your cat will seem 'off colour' for a day or two after its vaccination and the injection site may also become tender and swollen. If these effects do not wear off it is worth taking your cat back to see your vet. If you are concerned about any symptoms in your cat do not hesitate to contact your vet for reassurance or advice.

Infectious disease may not seem very common in cats because most cats are protected by vaccination. Your cat must receive regular vaccinations to be fully protected against these diseases.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your cat please contact your local Village Vet practice and we will be happy to advise you.