

Cat Vaccinations - the what and the why!



Just as in humans, vaccinating your cat helps to protect them against several serious and potentially life threatening diseases.

We vaccinate against the following four diseases:

Feline Panleucopenia (FPV)

- Also known as feline parvovirus, this is a severe and frequently fatal cause of haemorrhagic gastroenteritis (vomiting and bloody diarrhoea). Outbreaks of the infection with this virus are common and a high proportion of affected cats can die. Vaccination against this virus is highly effective and has a critical role in protecting cats against infection, especially as the virus is highly contagious. The virus can also survive for long periods in the environment so vaccination is the only real way to protect your cat.

Feline Herpes (FHV-1)

- This virus causes acute upper respiratory infections in cats and is transmitted through direct contact with saliva, eye and nasal secretions, inhalation of sneeze droplets, sharing of food bowls and litter trays and from a contaminated environment (i.e. bedding, grooming aids). The virus can only last for 1-2 days in the environment but once infected, cats are effectively life-long carriers of the virus. Symptoms include discharge from the eyes and nose, sneezing, salivation, lethargy, loss of appetite and coughing. Antiviral therapy is a safe and effective treatment alongside supportive antibiotics (a frequent complication is secondary bacterial infections) and good nursing care. Vaccination against FHV is important for ALL cats starting at around 8 weeks of age. There is only one strain of FHV so vaccination is not complicated by the existence of different strains.

Feline Calicivirus (FCV)

- Vaccines for both feline herpes and feline calicivirus are always combined as they are the two viruses that are the main cause of upper respiratory tract infections in cats (cat flu). As there are many different strains of the virus, it is difficult to design a vaccine that will protect against all of them. Transmission and symptoms of the virus are the same as feline herpes with the addition of potentially showing signs of gingivitis and "limping syndrome", which is as a result of inflammation of the joints. Joint pain is a transient problem but it can be extremely painful and uncomfortable for your cat. As with feline herpes, good nursing care (steam inhalation or nebulisation to ease severe nasal congestion) is an effective way to manage the infection. Vaccination against FCV is important for ALL cats starting at around 8 weeks of age.

Feline Leukaemia Virus (FeLV)

- Feline leukaemia (FeLV) belongs to a group of viruses known as "oncornaviruses" and have the ability to cause the development of tumours (cancer) in infected individuals. Other major effects of this disease are severe immunosuppression and development of anaemia, and more cats will die of these complications than from development of tumours. It is spread through prolonged social contact (mutual grooming, sharing of food bowls and litter trays) but can also be transmitted through biting and if a female cat is infected, any kittens she may produce will also be infected. It is estimated that 80-90% of infected cats die within 3-4 years of an F3LV diagnosis.

The facts and the fiction!

Although vaccination is not a guarantee of prevention of an infection, it will greatly reduce the severity of the clinical disease.

Vaccinations may contain live organisms, killed organisms or parts of other organisms responsible for producing proteins important in provoking a good immune response. Vaccines undergo rigorous testing to ensure that they are safe and that they do what they are meant to do.

What does a vaccination contain?

There are "core" and "non-core" vaccinations. Core vaccinations are considered essential for all cats, including those cats that live indoors only. This is because of the widespread and severe nature of the diseases being protected against. Non-core vaccinations are only given to cats if there is a genuine risk of exposure to the infection and if vaccination would provide good protection.



How often should I vaccinate my cat?



All kittens should receive their core vaccinations and any others that are agreed with the vet. The initial course is usually given at 8 weeks of age with the second, 3-4 weeks later, and after this initial course, an annual health check should be done. Cats who stay in boarding facilities will generally be required to have an annual vaccination beforehand as this poses a higher risk environment.

Are there any risks associated with vaccination?

These are very rare. The most common side effects, which can last for a few days, are mild and can include lethargy, loss of appetite or tenderness at the site of the injection.

More noticeable side effects may include vomiting, diarrhoea, lameness, fever, signs of respiratory tract infection or lumps at the site of the injection.

Monitoring the injection site regularly and if there is any sign of persistent swelling or it continues to enlarge, checking in with a vet is advisable.

Vaccination is generally a very safe procedure that has substantially reduced the impact of several very serious diseases.

