

Vaccinating Your Cat

Vaccinations can protect your cat against serious infectious illnesses, but they aren't one size fits all. Your veterinarian can help you select the vaccines your cat needs based on age, health status, lifestyle and other risk factors. Even though he may not need vaccines that often, your cat should have a veterinary checkup every six to twelve months.

Core Vaccines

Core vaccines are those that are recommended for nearly every cat. Core vaccines for cats are Panleukopenia, Feline Herpesvirus-1, Feline Calicivirus, and Rabies. The first three are usually combined in a single injection that is given to kittens starting at 6-8 weeks of age and boosted every 3-4 weeks until at least sixteen weeks of age. Adult cats receive two doses initially, given 3-4 weeks apart. Thereafter, the combination vaccine is repeated every 1-3 years. The Rabies vaccination is given first at twelve weeks of age and boosted one year later. After that, Rabies vaccine is repeated every one to three years as determined by the laws in your area.

Feline Panleukopenia, or Feline Distemper, is a serious gastrointestinal disease. Symptoms resemble Parvovirus in dogs and include fever, lethargy, vomiting, diarrhea, dehydration, loss of appetite, miscarriage in pregnant cats, and nervous system damage in newborns. It is highly contagious and commonly fatal in non-vaccinated cats. Panleukopenia is rare in properly vaccinated cats.

Feline Herpesvirus-1 (Feline Rhinotracheitis Virus) and Feline Calicivirus cause respiratory illness. Non-vaccinated cats may get severely ill or even die. These viruses are extremely contagious. Vaccination gives incomplete protection, but vaccinated cats get only mild symptoms if they get sick at all.

Rabies is an incurable disease of the nervous system that is nearly always fatal. Worse yet, it is transmitted between most animal species, including humans. Although rabies transmission requires direct body fluid contact, even indoor pets can be at risk since sick wild animals may enter homes. Regular rabies vaccination is mandated by law in many areas.

Non-Core Vaccines

A myriad of other vaccines are available for cats. Your veterinarian can help you determine the right ones for your cat.

Feline Leukemia (FeLV) is an incurable immunosuppressive disease that causes cancers and makes cats extremely vulnerable to other illnesses. Although infected cats can remain healthy for several years, it is eventually fatal in most cases. FeLV is transmitted by close, direct contact between cats, so vaccination is most important for cats that go outside or otherwise contact potentially infected cats. Cats should be tested for FeLV before vaccination, since the vaccine doesn't help cats that already have the virus. Two doses of vaccine are given 3-4 weeks apart, as early as eight weeks of age. Annual revaccination is recommended.

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Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) is another incurable immunosuppressive disease, sometimes called Feline AIDS. Infected cats often appear healthy for years, but it is ultimately fatal in most cases. FIV is usually transmitted by cat bites. Unfortunately, available tests for FIV cannot distinguish an infected cat from a vaccinated cat.

Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP) is an incurable disease that makes the immune system turn itself on. It is usually fatal. The vaccine is most beneficial when given to cats that have previously tested negative and that are about to enter a high-risk environment such as an animal shelter or cat breeding facility.

Feline Chlamydophila causes a severe eye infection. Its spread by direct contact and is common in places where large numbers of cats are housed together. Vaccination is recommended for cats at risk.

Feline Bordetella causes upper respiratory illness and coughing. Its highly contagious, but is primarily a concern for animal shelters and cat breeding facilities. Vaccination is recommended for cats at risk.

Ringworm is a contagious disease that causes hair loss and skin irritation. It can be transmitted to other animals and people. However, the vaccination seems to be mainly beneficial for treating cats that already have ringworm.

Preventive Health Care Beyond Vaccinations Preventive health care for your cat means more than just vaccinations. Checkups every six to twelve months can catch many health problems while they are easily treatable. Parasite control, good nutrition, and regular dental care are other keys to keeping your cat healthy for years to come.