

Feline Vaccination Information

What are vaccines?

Vaccines are health products that trigger protective immune responses in pets and prepare them to fight future infections from disease-causing agents. Vaccines lessen the severity of future diseases and certain vaccines can prevent infection all together. Today, a variety of vaccines are available for use by veterinarians. Cats in Australia are exposed to a number of highly infectious diseases, and outbreaks do occur occasionally around the country. By following a correct vaccination program your cat will be protected from these potentially harmful diseases.

How do vaccines work?

Vaccines work by exposing the body's immune system to a particular modified infectious agent. This causes the white blood cells to react to fight the infection by producing proteins (antibodies) that are able to bind to and neutralise the infectious agent (antigen). Antibodies work together with other white blood cells (lymphocytes) that are able to identify and kill cells within the body that have become infected by the agent (cell mediated response). After vaccinal exposure the body 'remembers' the particular antigens so that when they are encountered again it can mount a very rapid and strong immune response preventing the cat from showing clinical signs of disease.

What diseases should my cat be vaccinated against?

There are a number of diseases that all cats should be vaccinated against. These are:

(F3) Feline Enteritis. Feline enteritis (feline panleukopaenia) is caused by a feline parvovirus that is found in infected faeces. It is a very hardy virus and will survive in the environment for long periods of time. A special disinfectant is required to sanitise objects and areas that have been exposed to feline enteritis virus such as food bowls, bedding and clothes. An infected cat may show signs of inappetence and depression. This can progress to severe abdominal pain, profuse vomiting and diarrhoea, which usually contains blood. The virus may cause abortion in pregnant queens or foetal abnormalities. Mortality rates in young kittens are very high.

(F3) Feline Respiratory Disease. Feline respiratory disease (Cat Flu) can be caused by a number of organisms, however most cases are due to **Feline Rhinotracheitis Virus (herpes virus) and Feline Calicivirus (aggressive form of Cat Flu)**. These organisms are usually spread when an infected or carrier cat coughs or sneezes. Multi-cat households and boarding catteries are both high-risk environments for transmission of Cat Flu. After infection, cats usually become carriers of the virus for many years (often lifelong). These cats continue to spread the virus to other cats, even after they have recovered from the initial infection themselves. Symptoms may include a fever, sneezing, coughing, discharge from the nose and eyes, ulcers on the tongue, loss of appetite and lethargy. These symptoms may persist for 3-4 weeks, however the cat may still act as a carrier for many years after recovery.

(F4) Feline Chlamydomphila. Feline Chlamydomphila (formerly known as Chlamydia) mainly causes conjunctivitis in the cat. Conjunctivitis may be defined as the inflammation of the delicate membranes or conjunctiva that cover the inner surface of the eyelids and over the white part of the eye (the sclera). However, this infectious organism is not responsible for the full range of signs associated with cat 'flu.

(F5) Feline Leukaemia Virus (FeLV)

Feline Leukaemia Virus (FeLV) is a retrovirus that is similar to a more common virus known as Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV). Many cats can overcome the infection, however if they become persistently infected FeLV may cause cancers, immunosuppression and reproductive problems, amongst other conditions.

How do cats catch FeLV? FeLV is passed from cat to cat via saliva. Unlike FIV which is transmitted via biting, the transfer of FeLV is usually between friendly cats. This usually occurs during grooming or by sharing food bowls. Occasionally mothers can pass the infection to their kittens either in the womb or via milk. Kittens are particularly susceptible to contracting persistent infections, whereas most adult cats are able to eliminate the virus. Once a cat becomes persistently infected, it remains so for life.

(F5) Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV)

Infected cats may appear normal for years. However, infection eventually leads to a state of immune deficiency that hinders the cat's ability to protect itself against other infections. The same bacteria, viruses, protozoa, and fungi that may be found in the everyday environment--where they usually do not affect healthy animals--can cause severe illness in those with weakened immune systems. These secondary infections are responsible for many of the diseases associated with FIV. **How is FIV spread?** The primary mode of transmission is through bite wounds. Casual, non-aggressive contact does not appear to be an efficient route of spreading FIV; as a result, cats in households with stable social structures where housemates do not fight are at little risk for acquiring FIV infections. On rare occasions infection is transmitted from an infected mother cat to her kittens, usually during passage through the birth canal or when the newborn kittens ingest infected milk. Sexual contact is not a major means of spreading FIV.

When does my kitten or cat need to be vaccinated?

The recommended vaccination schedule is as follows:

1st Vaccination 6-8 weeks - F4 Vaccine (Enteritis/Herpesvirus/Calicivirus/Chlamydia)

2nd Vaccination 12-14 weeks - F4 Vaccine (Enteritis/Herpesvirus/Calicivirus/Chlamydia)

Annual Booster - F4 Vaccine (Enteritis/Herpesvirus/Calicivirus/Chlamydia)

In addition, consideration should also be given to administering a booster dose before times of probable heavy challenge or if more than 12 months have elapsed since the last dose of vaccine was administered.

Is vaccination really necessary?

Vaccination is a very important and necessary part of your cat's preventative health program. The immunity your cat gains from being vaccinated will diminish with time. Yearly vaccination is the only way we can ensure protection against several serious and potentially fatal diseases.

Annual vaccinations are also required if your cat is to go to a boarding cattery. Unvaccinated animals will not be accepted in these situations.

Annual vaccinations also provide an ideal opportunity for the veterinarian to perform a complete physical examination and wellness check of your cat and to discuss any concerns you may have.

My cat is an inside cat. Does it still need to be vaccinated?

Yes your cat still needs to be vaccinated. Many of the diseases we vaccinate against are airborne (such as cat 'flu) or can be brought into the home on your shoes. Your cat therefore does not need to come into direct contact with another cat to become infected.

The fact that your cat is housed inside means it is isolated. This removes any opportunity to be naturally 'vaccinated' and reimmunise themselves. As a result their level of immunity may in fact be lower than a cat who is allowed outside.

Is the vaccine 100% effective?

The immune response is a biological response. There are a number of factors that influence this response and as such a vaccination can never be 100% guaranteed. In the vast majority of cases the vaccine will produce an immune response that results in the animal developing adequate immunity to protect against disease. There is however a very small number of animals that may not develop this required level of immunity and may still be susceptible to infection.

Do vaccinations have any side effects?

It is highly unlikely that the vaccine will make your pet sick or have any side effects. A very small percentage of animals may experience a temporary reaction such as a stinging sensation or be a little lethargic for 24 hours. More serious reactions are extremely rare. Your veterinarian can discuss these in more detail with you.

Information has been adapted from Bondi Veterinary Hospital website: <http://www.bondivets.com.au/index.htm>