

Dr. Oakley says....

To vaccinate or not to vaccinate...that is the question. So, a pet's healthcare life begins at the vet in kittenhood or puppydom with being measured, weighed, examined, dewormed and vaccinated. We then return to the vet for our booster shots to follow up on the first vaccinations we received. We know that vaccination offers protection from serious diseases such as canine parvovirus, distemper, rabies, feline leukemia and more.

We are happy that modern medicine has provided these vaccinations especially for the weakest and youngest of us that would otherwise certainly not survive these diseases. However, many have begun to ask about how necessary it is to continue with the "routine" vaccinations in later years since we are increasingly aware of the possible unintended consequences. What can we do?

Testing. Specifically, titer testing. Titer tests are a tool that pet owners and veterinarians can use to help minimize the risks of disease and unnecessary vaccinations. The simple explanation is that the tests can tell you if the last vaccination is still protecting your dog.

I know that the Zickmanns have titers run on themselves for rabies. The rabies vaccination for humans is much more expensive and involved than for pets and so every few years, they have a titer run (a blood test) to check the level of rabies antibodies in their system. If the numbers are good, they don't need more shots. When the numbers are down, they will require further immunization. This can differ from person to person and pet to pet.

The advantages of titers are to eliminate unnecessary vaccinations, especially for pets with adverse reactions. Sometimes pets can develop lethargy, allergic reactions or even, but rarely, more severe problems like sarcoma or other tumors.

The decision to vaccinate or titer is a difficult one. Most experts agree that we need vaccinations, the debate is only on how often.

Titer testing can be more expensive than the vaccines themselves but generally not unreasonably high. Titer testing is recommended for things like parvovirus, distemper and adenovirus but not for Leptospirosis, Bordetella or Lyme disease because these show only short-term vaccination protection.

Rabies vaccinations provide long-term protection and the titer tests are considered to be very accurate. Unfortunately, in the United States rabies vaccination is mandated by law and there are currently no states that allow titer-test results in lieu of vaccination history. If there is a dog bite, quarantine is still required even if the titer-test shows accurate protection. Some states and countries are rabies-free, like Hawaii, Japan, Great Britain and they are more accepting of titer-testing for rabies if you relocate there. Sadly, until the issue is worked out, proof of rabies vaccination or quarantine times are required.

To sum it up, puppies and kittens need their vaccinations! An adult adopted pet whose health history is a mystery could benefit from titer testing before vaccinations. If you could see what antibodies they have in their system, you would know which vaccinations they had already received and how protected they are. Additionally, young dogs can sometimes benefit from titer-testing to see if their system responded to the initial vaccine series giving full protection. Your veterinarian can help you decide the best course of action regarding vaccinations or titer-testing and when it is appropriate. Vaccinating animals against infectious diseases is critical to protecting our communities and our pets, the concern of over-vaccinating is a real issue. The

tool of titer-testing provides us further information to make the best health-care decisions for our best friends!

Peace,

Dr. O