

CAT VACCINATION



Feline infectious diseases in the UK

Infectious diseases once killed thousands of pets each year. Thankfully veterinary science has advanced significantly and these killer diseases can now be vaccinated against. Although vaccination has not eradicated infectious diseases completely, it has dramatically reduced the frequency of these diseases and therefore saved many feline lives.

What is a vaccination?

Like all animals, your cat has an immune system which is the body's natural ability to fight infection. Vaccination works by exposing the body to a small but entirely harmless dose of the disease in question. The cat's immune system then reacts by producing a defence and can cleverly "remember" how to defend against the disease again. This "memory" will however fade in time, increasing the risk that the cat's body cannot put up a strong enough defence. Vaccination reminds the cat's immune system how to defend against the disease again.



What diseases can we vaccinate against?

Cat Flu - This is the common name for feline upper respiratory tract disease. A lot like the human cold, causing fever, runny nose and eyes, sore throat, sneezing and loss of appetite. Suffering cats may also develop mouth ulcers making it difficult and painful to eat. Very young or old cats may also contract pneumonia, which can be fatal. The virus can be spread by direct contact with an infected cat or by exposure to the pathogen in the environment (it can survive up to a week). Cats who recover from the disease can shed the virus throughout their lives, although they won't necessarily show symptoms. Cat flu is widespread and highly contagious.



Feline Leukaemia - This devastating viral disease is responsible for more deaths than any other feline infectious disease, one third of cats infected die within 2-4 years. Symptoms range vastly from fever, weight loss and lethargy to respiratory distress and intestinal problems. The virus also weakens the cat's immune system leaving them vulnerable to other diseases. The disease is most commonly spread by direct cat-to-cat contact as the virus cannot survive long outside the body. It can however also be transmitted to other cats by use of the same litter tray or food bowls. S



Feline Infectious Enteritis - This disease is also known as panleukopaenia and is similar to the parvovirus in dogs. The virus attacks the cat's digestive tract causing severe vomiting and diarrhoea, sadly it is often fatal, especially in young kittens. Kittens from an infected pregnant cat can be born with permanent neurological problems. It is transmitted from contact with contaminated items such as food bowls, toys or clothing, the virus can survive for a long time in the environment, so even indoor cats are at risk. It is fairly uncommon in the UK at present.

Rabies - Often not thought about with cats but this extremely dangerous virus can infect our feline friends too. It is transmitted through a bite from an infected animal, so any animal can contract rabies. It is also zoonotic (can spread to people) and is almost always fatal. Rabies affects the neurological system of the animals and symptoms worsen over time including behaviour changes (such as aggression), seizures, disorientation, paralysis, coma and ultimately death. There has been no known cases of rabies in the UK for over a century although it is still a serious problem in much of the rest of the world. Vaccination is highly recommended for all travelling pets and compulsory if you wish to bring them back to UK.



Why vaccinate?

It is worth remembering that many of the diseases we vaccinate are potentially killers, only a vaccination can prevent your cat from contracting the disease if they are exposed to infection. Due to the infectious nature of the diseases, you will find if you need to put your cat needs to stay in a cattery, they will request proof that your cat is regularly vaccinated. Travelling on a Pets Passport also requires regular vaccination.



When should my cat be vaccinated?

Kittens are protected from infectious diseases for the first few weeks of life thanks to the immunity they get passed from their mother when they feed. This immunity fades quickly, leaving the kitten vulnerable to disease. For this reason we advise kittens are vaccinated with a course of two injections a few weeks apart. These initial courses can be given from eight weeks old. As discussed earlier, immunity provided by the vaccination will wane over time making it necessary for cat's to have a booster vaccination every year.

Are annual boosters really necessary?

The immune system of each cat responds differently and the recommended time between vaccinations is based on the minimal period of protection. We recommend your cat is vaccinated annually. There have been studies to determine if the immunity period can be extended to more than a year and for some diseases it can be. For example the part of the injection that protects against feline enteritis only has to be given every 3 years. However, there are no vaccines available that protect your cat against leukaemia or cat flu for more than a year.



I've heard vaccinations cause more illness than they prevent. Is that true?

As with any medicinal product, adverse reactions can happen. It is however exceptionally rare for there to be a serious reaction to vaccination injections. Cat vaccines have been tested thoroughly for safety and efficacy.



If you have any questions about the diseases we vaccinate against, please speak to a member of our staff at any of our surgeries (an appointment may be necessary).



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