

Dog Vaccines: Protecting Your Best Friend's Health

Vaccines are one of the most important tools we have to keep dogs healthy and prevent serious infectious diseases. Whether your dog is a playful puppy, a seasoned adventurer, or a homebody who rarely leaves the couch, vaccination is essential to their long-term wellbeing.

Why Vaccines Matter

Vaccines work by training your dog's immune system to recognize and fight off specific viruses or bacteria before they can cause illness. Many of these diseases are **highly contagious**, and some can even be **transmitted to humans** (like rabies and leptospirosis).

By keeping your dog up to date on vaccines, you're protecting **both your pet and your community**.

Core vs. Non-Core Vaccines

Vaccines are grouped into two categories:

- **Core vaccines:** Recommended for **all dogs**, regardless of lifestyle.
- **Non-core vaccines:** Given based on your dog's **individual risk** (for example, where you live, travel habits, or exposure to other dogs).

Your veterinarian will tailor a vaccine plan to your dog's age, health, and lifestyle.

Core Vaccines for Dogs

1. Canine Distemper

Cause: Canine distemper virus

About the disease: Distemper is a **highly contagious and often fatal** viral disease that attacks the respiratory, digestive, and nervous systems. It spreads through airborne droplets or contact with infected animals.

Signs include:

- Coughing, nasal or eye discharge
- Vomiting and diarrhea
- Seizures or muscle twitches
- Fever and lethargy

Vaccination provides excellent protection and has made this once common disease much rarer.

2. Canine Adenovirus (Hepatitis)

Cause: Canine adenovirus type 1 (CAV-1)

About the disease: This virus causes **infectious canine hepatitis**, which affects the liver, kidneys, and eyes. It can be deadly, especially in young dogs.

Signs include:

- Fever and loss of appetite
- Vomiting and abdominal pain
- Jaundice (yellowing of eyes or gums)
- Cloudiness in the eyes (“blue eye”)

The vaccine uses a related virus (CAV-2) that also protects against adenovirus respiratory infection without the side effects of older vaccines.

3. Canine Parainfluenza

Cause: Canine parainfluenza virus

About the disease: This virus contributes to **kennel cough**, a contagious respiratory illness spread through coughing and sneezing.

Signs include:

- Dry, hacking cough
- Nasal discharge

- Mild fever
Vaccination helps reduce severity and prevents outbreaks in boarding facilities, daycares, and shelters.
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4. Canine Parvovirus

Cause: Canine parvovirus (CPV)

About the disease: Parvo is one of the **most serious and life-threatening** diseases in dogs, especially puppies. The virus attacks the intestinal tract and immune system, causing severe dehydration and infection.

Signs include:

- Profuse vomiting and bloody diarrhea
 - Lethargy and loss of appetite
 - Rapid dehydration
Parvo is **highly contagious** and can survive in the environment for months.
Vaccination is the best protection — this disease is preventable with proper immunization.
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5. Leptospirosis

Cause: *Leptospira* bacteria

About the disease: Leptospirosis is a **bacterial infection** spread through water, soil, or urine from infected wildlife (like raccoons, skunks, or rodents). It can damage the **liver and kidneys** and can also infect humans.

Signs include:

- Fever and muscle pain
- Vomiting and loss of appetite
- Jaundice (yellowing of gums or eyes)
- Increased thirst and urination
Vaccination is strongly recommended for most dogs, especially those who spend time outdoors, swim in lakes, or live in areas with wildlife.

6. Rabies

Cause: Rabies virus

About the disease: Rabies is a **fatal viral infection** that attacks the brain and nervous system. It can be transmitted to people and other animals through saliva, usually from a bite.

Signs include:

- Behavioral changes (anxiety, aggression, confusion)
- Difficulty swallowing or drooling
- Paralysis and death

Even indoor or fenced-in dogs need protection in case of unexpected exposure.

Non-Core Vaccines

1. Bordetella (Kennel Cough)

Cause: *Bordetella bronchiseptica* bacteria

About the disease: Bordetella is one of the most common causes of **kennel cough**, a contagious respiratory infection spread easily between dogs through coughing, sneezing, or shared bowls. It's especially common in places where dogs gather — like boarding kennels, grooming salons, dog parks, and daycare facilities.

Signs include:

- Dry, hacking cough (sometimes sounds like gagging)
- Sneezing or nasal discharge
- Mild lethargy or decreased appetite

Vaccination helps prevent or lessen symptoms, making it an important choice for social or frequently boarded dogs. It can be given as an injection, nasal spray, or oral vaccine, depending on your veterinarian's recommendation.

Vaccine Schedule

- **Puppies** start their first vaccines at **6–8 weeks old**, with boosters every **3–4 weeks** until about **16 weeks**.
- **Adult dogs** receive booster shots every **1–3 years**, depending on the vaccine and lifestyle.

Your veterinarian will design a schedule that keeps your dog fully protected.

Vaccine Titers

A **vaccine titer** is a simple blood test that measures your dog's level of antibodies against certain diseases, such as **distemper, parvovirus, and rabies**.

For some dogs, especially those with medical concerns or previous vaccine reactions, titers can help determine whether their immunity is still strong enough or if a booster is needed.

It's important to know that **titers don't replace all vaccines**. However, they can be a useful tool in making individualized vaccine decisions for your dog with your veterinarian's guidance.

After Vaccination

Mild fatigue or tenderness at the injection site is normal for a day or two. Serious reactions are rare, but contact your veterinarian if your dog experiences vomiting, swelling, or difficulty breathing after a vaccine.

A Lifetime of Protection

Keeping your dog's vaccines up to date is one of the easiest ways to ensure they live a long, healthy, and happy life. Combined with regular checkups, dental care, and parasite prevention, vaccination is the foundation of good preventive medicine.

Have questions about your dog's vaccine schedule, titers, or which vaccines are right for them?

Our veterinary team is here to help guide you and keep your canine companion protected at every stage of life.