



Chelsea Animal Hospital Inc.

Anne M. Carroll, DVM, CVA
Betty Jo Black, DVM, CVH

276 VT Rte 110 - PO Box 277
Chelsea, Vermont 05038
(802) 685-3232

Alternatively Speaking: A Holistic Approach To Vaccination Dr. Anne Carroll, DVM, CVA

Ready or not it will soon be spring. There will be robins on the branch, crocuses emerging in the lawn, and of course rabies clinics. These clinics serve a very important community function in preventing the spread of rabies, and my hospital hosts clinics for three surrounding towns, but they were not meant to be a substitute for healthcare. As a society we are becoming more cavalier about vaccination. With increasing pressure on our time and pocketbooks, more people may turn to a quick stop at a clinic for shots, just as we can walk into a pharmacy on any given day and receive multiple vaccinations without any input from our doctor. But without veterinary guidance, pets can receive more vaccinations than they may need, and when it comes to vaccination more isn't always better. First, let me state for the record that holistic veterinarians are not necessarily "anti-vaccine". I take the approach that a vaccine should be valued for its vital role in protecting against infectious disease, but also respected for what it is - a "biological drug" with potent effects on the immune system. Effects that in some cases can cause very real health issues, and that possibility should not be ignored.

The decision of what vaccines to give and how often to give them can raise some heated debates. Everyone from vaccine manufacturers, professional organizations, and legislators want to influence this discussion. Luckily most individual vaccination decisions are left to the veterinarians, who use guidelines based on the most up to date science. However, the pet owner should be armed with the knowledge that one size does not necessarily fit all. At the center of holistic medicine is the understanding that to treat a patient is to understand them on all levels. This includes all of a patient's past history, breed tendencies, diet, environmental exposures, etc. Vaccination is a medical decision that deserves the amount of conversation equal to that of any medical treatment or surgical procedure. The result is an individually tailored vaccine protocol that is specific to your pet, providing maximum protection with the least chance of harm.

How have we become concerned about excessive vaccination? Over the past several decades vaccination science has come a long way and our pets have benefited from more effective and safer vaccines. These advances have also created more vaccines than ever before, and they can be combined in up to a nine-in-one shot. The convenience of these "combo" shots has a down side too as they create the potential for pets to be immunized for diseases that they are not at risk for either because they are not common where your pet lives or what types of activities they do or don't do. But the main cause of overuse is that a few of the ingredients require annual boosters while the rest could go far longer than that, and giving all of them sooner is not needed. In general vaccines are safe and rarely cause issues, however certain breeds or individuals with

genetic sensitivity are at risk for vaccine related illness. Though rare, these issues have become more noticeable only as more pets than ever are immunized routinely with more shots than ever before. The most commonly recognized example of this is the potential for cancers in certain cats from any irritation of the skin, including those from vaccines. Researchers are also trying to correlate the suspected effects that over-vaccination can pose on the immune, endocrine and neurological systems. For now, it does seem that the risks may be enhanced if your pet is already having any issue that involves the immune system or chronic inflammation. This is why vaccination should be taken into consideration with a whole health plan, including the use of individual or smaller combination vaccinations that do not exceed what your pet really needs.

So how can veterinarians take a holistic approach to vaccination? Just as with any medical decision we weigh the risks and benefits. Our vaccination discussion should involve an assessment of the pet first, evaluating their current and past health issues, possible future issues common to the breed, and past vaccine experiences. We can then determine what diseases they could be exposed to and if those could cause enough harm to warrant protection. If there is no real benefit to the patient then even the small risk of vaccinating is not worth taking. When vaccination is needed, we can certainly take measures to reduce those risks by avoiding giving multiple vaccinations at once, postponing vaccines if the pet is not healthy, and giving vaccines no more often than the modern veterinary guidelines suggest. According to these guidelines, many traditional veterinarians are already using fewer immunizations, less often. Immunity can last long beyond what we once believed for many diseases and we can measure that protection using a test called a “titer” to determine if a vaccine is truly needed, especially in high risk patients such elderly pets, cancer patients, or those with chronic issues. Homeopathic remedies can also be used to minimize adverse effects in those that are at risk but need their shots.

In conclusion, to maximize your pet’s health this spring, don’t just vaccinate. They may need a booster or they may not. The important thing is that they get a good checkup to look for subtle signs of early disease that can go unnoticed at home and get updated on the latest recommendations for general health care, diets, parasite control and of course, vaccinations. Remember, getting an annual checkup for your pet is like a person going to the doctor once every seven years and a lot can happen in that time. This relationship with your veterinarian is what ultimately insures long-term health for your pet, not the medicines we hand out. And after all, if they are not needed, whose pet will complain that they did NOT get a shot?

Dr. Anne Carroll is owner of the Chelsea Animal Hospital where she practices both conventional medicine and surgery as well as several alternative modalities including traditional Chinese acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. Her associate Dr. Betty Jo Black brings classical homeopathy to the practice. For more information on alternative veterinary medicine visit their website at www.chelseaanimalhospital.com