

Vaccinations: Too Many, Too Often?

by Margo Biba

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Having been a “dog parent” for 20 Golden Retrievers and foster parent to 150+ rescue dogs, I’ve always kept their health as a primary focus. In the 1980s, Gary & I noticed that our Golden Retrievers weren’t living very long—to age 8 or 10. We had always been diligent about taking them for annual vaccinations, both as pups and then throughout their lives. As pups, they received many vaccinations & boosters for a multitude of illnesses; and once they grew up, we never strayed from their every-12-month vaccination schedule. So why was their health less than stellar? Why did they develop allergies and low thyroid and cancer? Why didn’t they live longer?

Many dogs later, we’ve hit upon simple



changes that make a real difference: better quality foods, dietary supplements, chemical-free lawn & pest control, and a reduction in vaccinations. Our Golden Retrievers are living—consistently—to age 13 or 14, or even 15. Even better, they have spectacular quality of life. They are bright-eyed and amazingly energetic. Keep in mind that many of these oldsters came to GRR after eating poor-quality foods and having sub-par health care. Or the opposite—they’d been given too many vaccinations, too often.

Take heart. You too can boost your dog’s immune system, whether you start with a young pup or adopt an adult or senior. One place to start is by examining your particular dog’s vaccination schedule with your veterinarian. A reduction in the variety of vaccines and their frequency may very well result in a healthier, longer-lived pal.

Vaccination frequency

Until recently, annual vaccinations were considered necessary for dogs’ health & well-being: if some vaccinations were good, more must be better. New research, however, points toward problems with over-vaccination—giving too much, too often.

The larger picture is something called vaccinosis, the result of the body’s immune system being overwhelmed by vaccines. Short- to mid-term symptoms can include fever, sore joints, susceptibility to infections, and other problems. Long-term symptoms may range from serious allergies and low thyroid (so prevalent in our Golden Retrievers) to epilepsy, seizures, aggression, gastrointestinal issues, bleeding disorders, and other inflammatory & chronic illnesses.

Increasing numbers of veterinary experts recommend giving fewer vaccines to our dogs. After all, we humans all had a series of shots as children, but no one is suggesting we get those same shots annually for the rest of our lives!

Dr. Jean Dodds, a highly respected veterinary hematologist and immunologist in California, pioneered the vaccine debate decades ago and is now considered one of the leading authorities on canine vaccine protocols. According to Dr. Dodds, many recent studies confirm that the vast majority of dogs, in most cases at least

95% of the subjects, retain immunity for many years after receiving vaccines.

“Core” vaccines

Vaccines are available for more than two dozen diseases, but very few dogs are at risk for most of these ailments. It makes sense to talk to your vet, evaluating which diseases pose the greatest risk for your area and your dog’s particular situation. Ronald D. Schultz, Ph.D, who chairs the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, is one of the country’s leading experts on veterinary vaccines. He suggests limiting vaccinations to diseases that are highly contagious and potentially fatal:

- Canine parvovirus type 2 (CPV-2)
- Canine distemper virus (CDV)
- Canine adenovirus type 2 (CAV-2)
- Rabies

Spreading core vaccines over several veterinary appointments further decreases risk of adverse reaction. “Separating the administration of any vaccines by a 4-week interval is always wise,” comments Marcia Van Brunt, DVM, of Austin.

“Non-core” vaccines & “not recommended” vaccines

Non-core vaccines are those which should be given only to dogs who need them, and only as often as needed, according to Dr. Schultz and others. An example of a non-core vaccine is leptospirosis. It has a short protection time (less than one year), and to provide full coverage, the vaccine must include all four strains of the disease—with the added complication that new strains are appearing all the time. Leptospirosis has not been seen much in Central Texas until recently, possibly because show dogs are bringing it back from other states. But for now, leptospirosis vaccination is not indicated for the typical family pet. And what’s more, “Many dogs have reactions



to leptospirosis vaccine,” says Catherine Nairn, DVM, of Austin. It is noted that Golden Retrievers are more susceptible to reactions to leptospirosis, therefore it is *not* recommended by GRR.

Both coronavirus & the new vaccine against giardiasis (an intestinal protozoal infection) are repeatedly mentioned as “not recommended.” According to Dr. Schultz, “To date, no one can demonstrate a benefit for coronavirus vaccine.” Many experts feel that giardiasis does not pose sufficient risk to justify vaccination.

Rabies vaccinations

Rabies is the only vaccination required by the State of Texas. In 2003, the State changed a two-decade-old requirement for annual rabies vaccinations, decreeing that dogs and cats could now wait 3 years between shots. The change delighted vets and pet owners.

In the case of elderly or ill dogs, an exception to the rabies vaccination requirement is sometimes made if the owner is highly motivated. This generally requires a high antibody titer test and a letter from the dog’s primary veterinarian, stating that in the vet’s opinion, a rabies vaccination would likely result in irreversible health problems.

When to avoid or delay vaccinations

Label directions warn veterinarians not to vaccinate a sick animal, and Stacey Hershman, DVM, a holistic veterinarian in New York, includes injured or stressed animals in that caution. “Vaccinating a dog who’s being spayed, neutered, or treated for an injury is totally irresponsible,” she says. “You want the animal to be healthy, not in a weakened, vulnerable state, when you introduce substances designed to

challenge the immune system.” Elderly dogs are particularly at risk. Dr. Dodds believes that after 10 years of age booster vaccines are generally not needed and may even be unwise.

Should we stop vaccinating entirely?

In some cases, owners or breeders do not vaccinate at all, out of concern for their dogs’ immune systems. This decision cannot be taken lightly. In general, certain vaccinations are necessary and important in protecting your dog’s health. In particular, Texas requires vaccination for rabies. The key is to limit the kind and frequency of vaccinations.

What you can do

According to Whole Dog Journal, a monthly newsletter of holistic healthcare and positive training methods:

- Talk to your veterinarian and be extremely cautious before you vaccinate a dog who is elderly, sick, injured, has a chronic health condition, has a family history of sensitivity to vaccines or other drugs, or is a member of a breed known to be at risk for immunological reactions. (Golden Retrievers are one of those breeds.)



- Vaccinate only for “clinically important” diseases or those that are a real threat to your dog, such as distemper and parvovirus; and in cases where vaccination is required by law, as for rabies.
- For dogs older than one year, consider measuring your dog’s serum antibody titers, using a blood test (see box, below).

Editor’s Note: GRR has a strict policy (stated in our adoption contract) that all Golden Retrievers adopted through GRR be kept up to date on vaccinations for DHLPP, parvovirus, and rabies. Keep them safe, keep them healthy, and help them live longer. 🐾

Titer Tests

Titer testing involves taking blood to check the level of circulating antibodies from previous vaccinations and natural exposure to disease agents; this is thought to provide an index to the dog’s overall immunocompetence. There’s a lot of controversy around titers, concerning their cost and whether they’re even necessary, so discuss the subject with your vet; she or he can give advice pertinent to your dog in particular. Some veterinarians, such as Dr. Dodds, suggest annual titering for just two vaccines, distemper and parvovirus, to assess the dog’s overall ability to fight those diseases and others.

