

Pet Vaccine Hesitancy: Are the Concerns Real or Baseless?

Over half of all US dog owners are now skeptical about vaccinating their pets, and while some experts blame it on the pandemic, it's not a new trend. Should you be concerned about vaccinating your pet? Facebook suppressed my post on the subject, so I'm repeating it here for you to read.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A recent study shows that over half of U.S. dog owners are skeptical about vaccinating their pets; so-called "canine vaccine hesitancy" is thought by the study authors to be a "spillover effect" of the pandemic
- The researchers, all from the Boston University School of Public Health, are concerned that non-vaccination of pets could ultimately result in negative health implications for humans, while the concern of pet parents is that veterinary vaccines are unsafe, ineffective, and unnecessary
- "Vaccine hesitancy" among pet parents isn't new — a 2019 article in Time magazine discusses the so-called threat of "anti-vaxxer" pet parents; the article's author, a veterinary vaccine advocate, conflates "anti-vaxxers" with pet parents concerned about the dangers of over-vaccinating their animal companions
- It's possible the bigger threat is actually veterinarians who can't provide answers as to why pets need to be repeatedly vaccinated against the same diseases throughout their lives; pet parents have a right to be concerned about a veterinary community disinterested in both the potential long-term effects of repeated vaccinations, and offering titer testing in lieu of automatic re-vaccinations
- The goal of both veterinarians and pet parents should be to immunize companion animals against disease, thereby preventing the spread of infectious diseases and confirm enduring immunity through antibody titer tests

According to the results of a new study by researchers at the Boston University School of Public Health, among a group of 2,200 U.S. adult dog owners, over half (53%) are skeptical about vaccinating their pets, including against **rabies**. The study, titled "Sick as a dog? The prevalence, politicization, and health policy consequences of canine vaccine hesitancy (CVH)," was published last month in the journal *Vaccine*.¹ According to Veterinary Practice News:

*"The decline in public confidence in vaccines during the pandemic seems to have cast a shadow of mistrust over various aspects of vaccination, including those designed for pets."*²

As well it should. It seems dog owners are concerned about the "safety, efficacy, and necessity" of vaccinations for their pets. I say, good for all you pet parents out there "experiencing Canine Vaccine Hesitancy (CVH)."³ More veterinarians should be having the same experience, in my opinion, and offering alternatives (titer tests) at an affordable cost.

Study Results Show Many More Pet Parents Are Awake

Additional results from the study:

- Nearly 40% of dog owners feel canine vaccines are unsafe
- More than 20% consider them ineffective
- 30% perceive them as medically unnecessary
- 37% believe vaccines may cause autism in their pets (more about this later)

In a phenomenon dubbed the "vaccine spillover effect," according to the study authors, people who "hold negative attitudes toward human vaccines" are more apt to be skeptical of pet vaccines.

"The vaccine spillover effects that we document in our research underscore the importance of restoring trust in human vaccine safety and efficacy," says study lead and corresponding author Matt Motta, PhD, assistant professor of health law, policy & management at Boston University's School of Public Health. "If non-vaccination were to become more common, our pets, vets, and even our friends and family risk coming into contact with vaccine-preventable diseases."

My educated guess is that if the entire approach to vaccines in general, the COVID mRNA injections in particular, along with childhood vaccines **and veterinary vaccines** as well, involved actual informed consent and focused first on safeguarding the health of each individual, there'd be a whole lot less so-called vaccine hesitancy.

Facebook Suppresses My Post on the Study

Upon seeing the Boston University School of Public Health study and a variety of press releases and articles discussing it, I headed over to **Facebook** to speak out. Unsurprisingly, Facebook suppressed my post to limit its reach. I'm repeating it here:

2.0 pet parents know that establishing lifelong protective immunity to potentially fatal viruses is critical for animal health. However, repeatedly vaccinating already-immunized animals does NOTHING to bolster the immune system, because you can't "boost" an already-immunized immune system. This is science, not woo. It's why you got childhood vaccines but aren't getting "boosted" annually as an adult.

Our worldwide community of empowered, intelligent animal advocates is well aware of this immunologic fact. They are asking important questions in the exam room such as, "I'm interested in doing a simple and easy vaccine antibody titer test in place of guessing whether or not my pet is protected. A titer test will demonstrate if my animal needs more vaccines or not, do you agree?"

Instead of the professional community of veterinarians answering the tough questions and having an open discussion that benefits everyone, these educated pet parents are being reported as "anti-vaxxers"?!

To any potential veterinary trolls out there wanting to argue: how can your clients who are passionate about achieving (and proving) lifelong protective immunity in their pets be labeled anti-vaxxers? Why don't humans schedule their measles/mumps/rubella boosters annually until we die? Because we assume we are protected for life (and we don't even titer to make sure!).

Brilliant pet parents understand the basics of immunology and are wise enough (and responsible enough) to ask for confirmation via a vaccine antibody titer blood test.

We aren't anti-vaxxers, we're science-based longevity junkies, and it's about time the completely inaccurate name calling stops. We want 100% of pets protected against disease. We don't want the consequences of potentially over-vaccinating. There's a massive difference between doing nothing and knowingly achieving protective immunity. It's time our profession evolves to match the intelligence of our educated client base and stops hurling inaccurate insults.

Vaccine Advocates vs. 'Anti-Vaxxers'

This whole "anti-vaxxer" pet owner argument isn't new. Back in 2019, Time magazine featured an article titled "Some Anti-Vaxxers Aren't Getting Their Pets Vaccinated. Here's Why That's So Dangerous."⁴

Unfortunately, it has become popular with veterinary vaccine advocates to refer to anyone who doesn't follow established pet vaccination guidelines as "anti-vaxxers," so it's impossible to know when reading this type of information how many people are refusing all vaccines and how many are refusing repetitive vaccines and/or vaccines against diseases their pets aren't at risk of acquiring.

In other words, people whose pets received the recommended puppy or kitten core vaccines and boosters at one year and now have their pets **titered** instead of automatically revaccinated, are called "anti-vaxxers" right along with people who refuse all vaccines, including puppy and kitten shots.

It's also popular among vaccine enthusiasts to cite fears of autism as the root cause of pet parents' increasing reluctance to re-vaccinate their animal companions. Since to date there's no scientific evidence that autism occurs in dogs, the pro-vaccine crowd seems to use this particular example to suggest ignorance on the part of pet owners who are concerned about vaccine adverse reactions or the unstudied and unknown immunologic side effects of repeated revaccinations.

However, in my experience, the vast majority of people hesitant to submit their pets to repeated vaccinations are simply concerned about the long-term health of their animals. Autism is almost never part of the discussion.

These people want their veterinarians to explain to them why their animals need to be vaccinated over and over again for the same diseases, and whether there are risks involved in injecting adjuvants into their pet year in and year out.

Veterinarians faced with these questions can point to the latest American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) vaccination guidelines, but those guidelines don't adequately address how long immunity actually lasts in vaccinated pets. Unbelievably, it's an area of research that has been virtually ignored by the veterinary community until very recently.

And can you guess who set the initial guidelines for annual veterinary vaccines decades ago? Vaccine manufacturers, that's who.

How Big is the Pet Parent 'Anti-Vaxxer' Movement, Really?

The Time article cites some **statistics from the U.K.** where the problem of "anti-vaxxers" is "acute," according to the author. Interestingly, the reason most often given by pet owners for not getting their animals vaccinated is, "it's not necessary."

In the case of puppy and kitten shots, the "it's not necessary" approach may be misguided and potentially life-threatening, especially in high-risk environments such as city pounds, shelters, and rescue organizations. However, in the case of pets who've been appropriately immunized as puppies and kittens and are titer tested in lieu of re-vaccination, "it's not necessary" is an entirely appropriate and intelligent response.

The Time author apparently had trouble digging up U.S. statistics on the "anti-vaxxer" movement. In fact, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) replied to him in an email that:

"We are not aware of studies that have documented a change in vaccination rates in pets. The ASPCA Community Medicine team alone performs tens of thousands of vaccinations annually for owned dogs and cats, rescue animals."⁵

To my knowledge, there is no pet parent "anti-vaxxer" movement in this country. However, as the Boston University study above shows, an increasing number of concerned pet parents are indeed objecting to repeated re-vaccinations per the recommended every one-year or three-year schedule, because veterinarians can't give them a satisfactory answer as to why those vaccines need to be given over and over and over.

Veterinary immunologist Dr. Ronald Schultz has done an excellent job educating pet parents about how pets' immune systems work over the last several decades. More and more owners understand that once a pet has established viral protective immunity, you can't "boost" the immune system and achieve additional protection with more vaccines. Now that thousands of pet owners understand more is not better, veterinarians are having a harder time justifying the unnecessary repetition.

Why Aren't Veterinarians Offering Affordable Titer Tests?

According to a 2017 article in the American Veterinarian on the so-called anti-vaccination movement, some of the skepticism about pet vaccines "may correspond to the more holistic lifestyle of the younger generation that has flocked to the trendy city".⁶ A veterinarian interviewed for the article had this to say:

"It's actually much more common in the hipster-y areas. I really don't know what the reasoning is, they just feel that injecting chemicals into their pet is going to cause problems."

A much more important question is, shouldn't veterinarians be at least as concerned as pet owners about repeatedly injecting unnecessary chemicals (adjuvants) into pets?

One dog parent interviewed for the American Veterinarian article is strongly against over-vaccination of pets because in her words, "vaccines tank immune systems, allowing a welcome mat for illnesses."

The woman had a young dog who developed an aggressive form of brain cancer shortly after being vaccinated, and she believes the cancer may have been encouraged by an immune system weakened by over-vaccination. She remains a strong advocate for vaccination of puppies and young dogs, but not for all adult dogs.

This is precisely the type of pet parent I mentioned earlier — she believes in initial puppy vaccinations, but not repetitive vaccinations of adult dogs. She also understands the importance and value of titer testing as an alternative to "booster vaccinations".

Titer testing is an effective way to determine whether previous vaccines are still providing immunity against specific diseases and can empower veterinarians to create customized vaccine protocols for individual pets.

After all, veterinarians must all be vaccinated for rabies themselves, but after our initial rabies vaccines we are titered for rabies antibodies in place of automatically receiving an annual human rabies vaccine. Does this make every veterinarian an "anti-vaxxer," or a hypocrite?

The Goal Should Be to Immunize, Not Repetitively Vaccinate

The goal of the conventional veterinary community is to encourage vaccinations, though the word they use is immunization, not vaccination. This is a hugely important distinction. Vaccination and immunization are not one and the same. Immunization is the outcome of effective vaccination against disease and/or exposure to a disease that the animal recovers from.

The act of administering a vaccine doesn't automatically mean the animal has been immunized against the disease, however, that is the assumption. Since I don't like to assume a pet is protected against disease, I make it a practice to run titer tests within a few weeks of the last round of puppy or kitten shots to ensure immunity has been achieved.

When an animal is successfully vaccinated against certain diseases (e.g., distemper, parvo, and adenovirus in dogs) and becomes immunized, she receives what we call sterile immunity. Sterile immunity lasts a minimum of 7 to 9 years, up to a maximum of lifetime immunity as measured by titer tests.

This means the dog cannot become infected, nor will she shed the virus should she be exposed. Since the diseases of distemper, parvo, and hepatitis (adenovirus) are everywhere, the risk of exposure is constant.

Other types of vaccines, typically **non-core vaccines** (called bacterins) against bacterial derived diseases such as Lyme disease, leptospirosis, bordetella (kennel cough), canine influenza (a virus, but one that mutates constantly so vaccine is not consistently protective), and others, do not produce sterile immunity.

These vaccines last a year at most, and antibody levels against these diseases (as measured by titer tests) decrease with each passing year, meaning lifelong protection is questionable (similar to tetanus vaccines in humans).

I prefer to run IFA (immunofluorescence antibody) titer tests for parvo and distemper because they give a clear-cut answer, either "yes the animal is protected," or "no, the animal is not protected". Because most veterinary schools are still not adequately educating their students about titer test interpretation, this removes any question of whether the pet is protected or not.

Serology and other testing methods can be confusing for pet parents and vets, alike. For example, a low serology score doesn't mean the pet isn't protected against disease. It's possible an animal may still be protected for up to a year or longer thanks to immune memory cells.

For purposes of comparison, veterinary core vaccines are similar to human polio and MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccines that provide lifetime immunity. Non-core veterinary vaccines can be compared to the human tetanus vaccine, which is also a bacterin and may not last for a lifetime.

How to Play It Safe and Smart With Your Pet's Vaccinations

Discuss what kinds of vaccines your pet needs, and how often, with your veterinarian. I strongly encourage you to try to **find an integrative veterinarian** to care for your pet, especially when it comes to vaccinations.

If you can't locate one in your area, make sure not to take your pet to any veterinary practice that insists on annual or more frequent re-vaccinations; download a **titer submission form** yourself and ask your vet to draw your dog's blood and submit it.

Also try to avoid any boarding facility, groomer, training facility, or other animal service that requires you to vaccinate your pet more than necessary. Instead, look for pet care providers who accept antibody titer tests in lieu of proof of vaccination.

Ensure each vaccine your furry family member receives meets the following criteria:

- Your pet is healthy! Animals must be healthy to receive vaccines, so if your pet has allergies, endocrine issues, organ dysfunction, cancer (or is a cancer survivor), or another medical issue he or she is NOT a candidate to receive vaccines.
- It is for a life-threatening disease (this eliminates most on the list immediately).
- Your pet has the opportunity to be exposed to the disease.
- The vaccine is considered both effective and safe (most aren't, especially the bacterins).
- Do not vaccinate a pet that has had a previous vaccine reaction of any kind.
- If you do vaccinate your pet, ask your integrative vet to provide a homeopathic vaccine detox such as Thuja (a common choice for all vaccines except rabies).

Rabies vaccines are required by law but insist on the 3-year vs. the 1-year vaccine and request the homeopathic rabies vaccine detoxifier Lyssin from your veterinarian. If your pet is young, ask to have the rabies vaccine given after 4 months of age, preferably closer to 6 months, to reduce the risk of an adverse reaction. Sick pets, including those with cancer, should never be vaccinated against rabies.

Sources and References

[Portland Press Herald, August 28, 2023](#)

¹ [Motta, M. et al. Vaccine Volume 41, Issue 41, 22 September 2023, Pages 5946-5950](#)

² [Veterinary Practice News, September 5, 2023](#)

³ [University of Nebraska Medical Center, Global Center for Health Security, August 29, 2023](#)

^{4,5} [Time, March 8, 2019](#)

⁶ [American Veterinarian August 10, 2017](#)