

Cat Vaccinations: Everything You Need to Know

Adapted from article by Dr. Jennifer Coates; Updated: November 3, 2020

Cat vaccinations, like regular physical examinations and quality nutrition, are essential parts of your pet's health program. Thanks to vaccinations, cats no longer have to suffer from several potentially fatal diseases. Preventing diseases is much simpler, kinder and usually more affordable than treating them.

Even though vaccinations are a welcome advancement in feline healthcare, they do include some risk. With all the information (and misinformation) circulating about vaccines, it's wise to learn about their pros and cons. Armed with that knowledge, you and your veterinarian can work together to keep your precious cat healthy.

What Vaccines Do Cats Need?

Vaccinations are given to prevent disease, not as a treatment for sick cats. All cats *should* receive core vaccines, which are the ones that guard against common and/or severe contagious diseases.

Common Cat Vaccinations

Vaccines protect pets by exposing them to 1) disease-causing microorganisms that have been modified so they can't cause the illness in question, or 2) small parts of those organisms that induce an immune response. By introducing a cat to this controlled stimulus, the body is prepared to handle future exposures.

Rabies Vaccine

Usually transmitted through the bite of an infected animal, rabies attacks the central nervous system and is fatal in cats. Wildlife such as coyotes, skunks and bats are typical carriers.

Outdoor cats are more likely to be exposed to the virus, but indoor cats also are vaccinated due to the disease's severity and the risk infected-cats pose to people. Most states require that cats be vaccinated against rabies.

The cat vaccination schedule for rabies depends on the vaccine used, but all of them begin no earlier than 12 weeks of age. There's a booster in about one year, after which it may be given annually or every three years, depending on vaccine type.

FVRCP Vaccine (feline viral rhinotracheitis, calicivirus and panleukopenia)

All three of these diseases are highly contagious. Feline viral rhinotracheitis and calicivirus have similar symptoms, including sneezing, fever, swollen eyes, lethargy and discharge from the eyes and/or nose. Cats also can develop ulcers of the mouth, eyes or skin.

Panleukopenia, also known as distemper, causes fever, diarrhea, vomiting, nasal discharge and bone marrow suppression. This disease frequently is fatal.

Cats can be vaccinated against all three of these diseases at once with the FVRCP combination vaccine. The vaccination series begins at 6-8 weeks of age with a booster given every 3-4 weeks until kittens are 16-20 weeks old. An additional booster at 1 year of age also is needed. After that, the vaccine's protection generally lasts for at least three years.

FeLV Vaccine (feline leukemia virus)

Cats infected with the feline leukemia virus often develop symptoms such as decreased appetite, digestive upset, poor coat condition, fever and swollen lymph nodes. As the disease progresses, the cat's weakened immune system puts him at risk for other illnesses, including cancer, and usually is fatal given enough time.

Cats most often are exposed to the virus through the bite of an infected cat. Other risk factors include mutual grooming, shared litter boxes and communal food bowls. Kittens are much more susceptible to FeLV than adult cats. A free-roaming outdoor or indoor/outdoor lifestyle is also a major risk factor. They will receive two doses 3-4 weeks apart, starting at about 8 weeks of age, and a booster at their first annual adult visit, and yearly after this.

Sample Vaccine/Combo Testing Schedule-Outdoor Cat

Age				
8-10 weeks	FVRCP #1			Combo test
11-13 weeks	FVRCP #2	Leuk #1		
14-16 weeks	FVRCP 1y	Leuk 1y	Rabies 1y	
1 year	FVRCP 3y	Leuk 1y	Rabies 1y	
2 years		Leuk 1y	Rabies 1y	
3 years		Leuk 1y	Rabies 1y	
4 years	FVRCP 3y	Leuk 1y	Rabies 1y	

Sample Vaccine/Combo Testing Schedule-Indoor Cat

Age			
8-10 weeks	FVRCP #1		Combo test
11-13 weeks	FVRCP #2		
14-16 weeks	FVRCP 1y	Rabies 1y	
1 year	FVRCP 3y	Rabies 1y	
2 years		Rabies 1y	
3 years		Rabies 1y	
4 years	FVRCP 3y	Rabies 1y	