

Cat Vet



**Melissa Catt BVSc MACVSc (feline)
Paddington Cat Hospital**

Melissa graduated from the University of Sydney in 1990. She worked in a private small animal practice in Adelaide for two years and then in England for a further two years. Melissa continued in private practice on her return to Sydney before starting Paddington Cat Hospital with her husband, Randolph Baral, in 1997. Melissa is interested in all aspects of feline medicine and has a particular liking for soft tissue surgery. Of course, Melissa was nominatively destined for feline medicine.

**210 Oxford Street, Paddington NSW 2021
Phone: (02) 9380 6111 Email: paddington@catvet.com.au**

VACCINATIONS IN CATS

There has been a lot of discussion recently about vaccinations in animals, particularly whether they need them at all and how often they should be given. As with vaccinating children, there will probably always be a number of opposing opinions (and misinformation!), but I will give an overview of the current best information on vaccinations and the recommendations of cat veterinarians.

Feline vets the world over strongly support the routine vaccination of all cats against major infectious diseases. Vaccination has played a vital role in greatly reducing the severity and incidence of some serious diseases. We see Feline Leukaemia virus much more rarely these days due to the success of the vaccination programme, and when speaking to vets who were practising 40-50 years ago, they talk about how much worse cat flu was then with a much higher mortality rate than nowadays.

Vaccinations can be split into 'core' and 'non-core' vaccinations. As their name implies, core vaccinations are ones that are recommended to be given to all cats, and consist of immunisation against feline Panleukopaenia (feline Parvovirus), Herpes Virus 1 and Calicivirus. These are given as one injection (called an F3). Non-core vaccinations may be recommended in specific circumstances; in Australia these are vaccinations against feline leukaemia virus (FeLV), Chlamydia and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV).

There is universal agreement that all cats should have a series of kitten vaccinations (F3) and the first annual vaccination a year later. The timing of subsequent vaccinations has been a point of discussion amongst veterinarians over the past few years, and there are still some differing opinions.

For cats that go into boarding facilities or come into a lot of contact with other cats, it is still recommended to have the vaccination annually. For cats that have limited exposure to other cats and are otherwise healthy with a good immune system, it may be appropriate to switch to triennial vaccinations (ie every 3 years, after the first annual vaccination) with annual check ups at the vet. It helps to know a little about the diseases that are being vaccinated against to understand why.

'Cat flu' is a relatively common disease condition that is unrelated to human influenza or the common cold. The usual suspects causing cat flu are feline Herpes virus and calicivirus (these viruses are specific to cats and don't affect people). These viruses are generally spread directly (sneezes, rubbing noses, air droplets), and don't live for long in the environment. It is possible for people to act as carriers, transporting the virus from one cat to another, but this is not as common as direct cat-to-cat transmission. Cats in a higher concentration (for example at a shelter or boarding facility, or living in an area with a lot of other cats) have a greater chance of becoming infected than cats with less exposure. Cat flu generally makes your cat feel poorly for a week or two, but these days it is fairly uncommon to see cats become very sick from this. Kittens and cats whose immune system is not 100% can still get very sick from cat flu, and there can be ongoing associated problems for the rest of the cat's life (for example recurrent conjunctivitis). There can be different strains of the viruses, so that it is possible for an immunised cat to become infected with another type of cat flu, but generally speaking vaccinated cats are much more resistant to cat flu than non-vaccinated cats. Unfortunately there is no clear scientific data indicating how long the vaccination provides immunity, so at this point we still have to make our decisions based on

available information and the individual cat's circumstances.

Feline panleukopaemia has been extremely well controlled through vaccinations over the past few decades, and is very rarely seen these days. The vaccination prevents infection and it appears that one vaccination is adequate for lifetime protection. This is an excellent example of vaccination success.

The main reason for discussing increasing the intervals between vaccinations is to minimise the chance of any adverse effects. It is not uncommon for cats to be a little unwell for 24-48 hours after certain vaccinations (as the immune system is being challenged), and sometimes there is local swelling at the site which resolves within 2-4 weeks. A much more serious potential side effect (and this can rarely be seen with other injections) is the development of a sarcoma at the injection site (a type of tumour which is highly malignant). There seems to be an association with Rabies vaccinations which is not done in Australia (except for cats travelling overseas), so it is much more commonly seen in the USA than here or the UK. At Paddington Cat Hospital we have seen only two cases of this over the past 14

years and thousands of vaccinations done (neither happened to have been vaccinated at our clinic), so it is still extremely rare.

One of the most important aspects of taking your cat to the vet is the physical examination. Usually, the vet will look at your cat's general condition, take a weight (and compare to previous recorded weights to check there is no unexpected increase or decrease), look at the teeth and mouth, listen to the heart, feel inside the abdomen, and other specialised observations. There is an opportunity to discuss diet, flea and worm control, whether your cat has any specific health concerns, and so on. This is a good time to talk about the vaccination requirements of your cat, both at that time and into the future, and together you can tailor a programme that suits your individual requirements. For this reason, even if it is advised to have the vaccinations done every three years, it is still a good idea to have a yearly vet visit (and possibly more often for older cats).

So there is no one answer to the question of how often should your cat be vaccinated- it is a matter of discussing the pros and cons and making the best decision in consultation with your vet.

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