

### What is “herd immunity”?

Due to widespread vaccination, incidents of diseases which until recently were very common, e.g. distemper and parvovirus, are infrequently seen in some areas. This can lull the pet owner and veterinary surgeon into a false sense of security and a belief that the disease is no longer present. This may lead to a relaxation of regular vaccination.

However, when a high proportion of dogs in the community are vaccinated the protection offered is called “herd immunity” and this limits the ability for disease outbreaks to spread.

### I’ve heard that some vaccines don’t need to be given every year so why do you still recommend annual vaccinations?

We don’t give the same vaccination booster every year. In the UK, the vast majority of vets vaccinate against several core canine diseases e.g. Distemper, Hepatitis, Parvovirus, (DHP) and Leptospirosis. The first three diseases only require ‘boosters’ every 3 years and a single injection in dogs greater than 10 weeks of age is enough to confer immunity.

However, to protect against Leptospirosis, yearly booster vaccinations are required and 2 injections are required to initiate immunity in a ‘naive’ animal. The “kennel cough” vaccine also requires an annual booster. We always look at a pet’s individual vaccination history before deciding on the most appropriate “booster”. For cats, annual boosters are needed for cat flu and leukaemia. Booster vaccinations for enteritis are required every 3 years. All feline vaccinations require a course of two injections to initiate immunity in a naive animal.

### Are vaccines safe for my pet?

Whether for disease prevention or treatment, the veterinarian, the animal owner and the public all have a right to expect that the preparation of animal medicines is reliably based on the triple standards of quality, safety and efficacy. The extremely stringent requirements for product registration reflect this. If these requirements were not met, a vaccine would not be allowed on the market. There are established procedures for reporting any suspect adverse reactions. Careful monitoring and review of products and disease patterns ensure that, once on the market, vaccines remain safe.

Today’s vaccines are very effective and have a remarkably high safety record. Each year, millions of doses are used annually in the UK alone. The use of vaccines has brought about levels of disease control against, for example, Canine Parvovirus that would have been almost undreamed of more than a decade ago. If an animal is unvaccinated or unboosted, it may be put in danger of contracting one or more than one of these potentially lethal diseases. Sooner or later an encounter with a severe disease challenge could prove fatal.

**An annual vaccination appointment also gives us chance to offer your pet a thorough head-to-toe health check and can often pick up on any health concerns before they become a problem.**

**Vaccinations at Woodcroft are more than “just-a-jab”, offering a range of free benefits, including one free multi-worming dose as part of our exclusive “Pet Club”. See our separate Pet Club leaflet or ask a member of our team for full details.**



## Vaccinations for cats and dogs Frequently Asked Questions



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### What is a vaccination?

Vaccination plays a central role in protecting dogs and cats from major infectious diseases. These include viral and bacterial diseases, which can cause significant illness and are difficult to treat.

Safe, effective, high quality vaccines have been developed to tackle many of the most common diseases and just as in human medicine, it is better to prevent an illness than try and cure.

### What diseases can affect my dog?

- **Distemper:** Affects dogs of all ages but is particularly common in puppies. It usually results in death and is characterised by respiratory signs such as runny eyes and nose, a cough and nervous signs such as fits may follow.
- **Parvovirus:** This is a distressing disease, often characterised by severe vomiting and profuse blood stained diarrhoea. This usually leads to dehydration and death. Again, it is common in puppies, but can affect and be fatal in older unvaccinated dogs.
- **Canine Viral Hepatitis:** A very contagious disease, whose symptoms are a high fever, vomiting and stomach pains. Again it can be fatal.
- **Leptospirosis:** Dogs infected by these bacteria can suffer liver and kidney damage and require prolonged treatment if they are to recover.
- **Infectious Bronchitis:** commonly known as “kennel cough” this disease, whilst rarely fatal, can be very distressing causing inflammation of the upper respiratory tract and a severe cough which may persist for weeks and can lead to permanent damage of the upper airways.

### What diseases can affect my cat?

- **Feline Enteritis (Panleucopenia):** This disease is most common and most severe in young kittens. Infected animals may die within 24 hours of the appearance of symptoms.
- **Cat “Flu” (Feline Rhinotracheitis and Calicivirus):** This is a highly infectious disease and unless prompt treatment is given, it can prove fatal. Even if treated in time, some cats are permanently affected with chronic snuffles or are persistent carriers.
- **Feline Leukaemia (FeLV):** FeLV is the number one killer of cats in the western world and there is no cure. It can affect young and old cats, but often affects the young. It may be carried for a number of years before any symptoms are seen, but it is possible to reveal infection of FeLV through a simple blood test carried out by your vet.

### Why should I vaccinate my pet?

Young animals receive some immunity from their mothers before and shortly after birth, both via the placenta and, principally, in the first milk (known as colostrum). It is important the newborns suckle early because maternally derived antibodies (MDA) are highest in the colostrum at the time of birth. This “natural” maternal immunity provides disease resistance for some weeks, but is unreliable as there are variations of MDA levels even within a litter.

Because the young animal does not actively produce this immunity, it decays over a period. Research has been carried out by blood testing dogs and cats to establish the timing of MDA decay for various diseases. This provides a guide to the average age at which puppies and kittens are no longer protected by the mother’s immunity and indicates the best time to start vaccination.

The first vaccinations stimulate the body to produce its own defence against infection, taking over the mother’s role in providing protection. In general, puppies and kittens do not leave their mother until they are eight to nine weeks old; so this is usually when they receive their first vaccination.

The initial vaccination course always consists of two vaccinations. This is because timing for effective vaccination varies between individuals because of variable MDA levels and because some vaccines, such as Leptospirosis for dogs, need to be administered twice to achieve a satisfactory level of immunity.

### Why does my pet need regular boosters?

Just as MDA declines, so too does the protection provided by vaccination. Your pet’s active immunity may be “topped up” in two ways:

- **By uncontrolled exposure to disease**  
Provided the adult animal is protected, you may not be aware that it is being challenged by disease and the animal’s body is stimulated to strengthen its defences by producing more antibodies. Although this works, it is an impractical way of ensuring continued immunity and places animals at unnecessary risk.
- **By means of a booster vaccination**  
This provides a controlled challenge to remind the animal’s immune system how to respond should it meet a killer disease. It also provides us with an ideal opportunity to carry out an annual examination on your pet’s general condition to ensure early diagnosis of diseases that are not controlled by vaccination.