Old Dogs And Vaccinations

Risk assessment for geriatric or very ill dogs

Do really old dogs and chronically ill, debilitated dogs need vaccinations? That's a good question. To start, there are two facts to understand:

1. No research has found solid answers to this question, and the vaccine guidelines don't address dogs by age once they're adults.

2. If you're concerned about vaccine safety, side effects, or over-vaccination, listen up: The diseases are worse.

Do Vaccines Work on These Dogs?

Vaccines stimulate the immune system to produce antibodies that protect the individual from specific diseases. In order for this to be successful, a safe, effective vaccine and a normal, healthy response by the dog's immune system are necessary. And that's where we fall into a gray area with old or ill dogs.

Can we get a normal vaccine response from a chronically ill or debilitated dog? No one knows for sure. It is possible that we are not even protecting these dogs; we're just opening them up to the risks associated with vaccination.

On the other hand, the strength of the immune system wanes as dogs age, which gives power to the argument that we should vaccinate these dogs as their natural ability to fight disease weakens.

What about dogs who are fighting a disease? This is especially concerning for dogs who suffer from immune mediated disease like immune-mediated hemolytic anemia (IMHA) or immune-mediated thrombocytopenia (ITP).

Immune-mediated or autoimmune disease occurs when the body's immune system starts attacking its own cells, which means the immune system is not functioning properly. As such, there's an unpredictability associated with it. Should we vaccinate these dogs, stimulating an immune system that has already gone awry, or are we just poking a hornet's nest? Most veterinary professionals lean toward not vaccinating these dogs due to the chance it will make the autoimmune disease even worse.

What Do You Do?

If you have a geriatric, chronically ill, or debilitated dog, talk with your veterinarian. Your veterinarian may recommend checking vaccine titers,

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Vaccine decisions are about doing what's best for your individual dog.

such as for the distemper-parvo vaccine. Titers are blood tests that measure the dog's disease-fighting antibody levels. If levels fall within the protective range, your dog may not require a booster that year. Titers cost more than vaccines, but they can minimize vaccinations.

Reassess your dog's lifestyle every year. As dogs age, mobility issues or other infirmities can keep them a bit closer to home than when they were younger. A dog who used to hike with you in wooded areas who now just steps outside for a nap in the sun on the porch likely has little need for leptospirosis or Lyme vaccinations. It's similar for the kennel cough (Bordetella) vaccine.

Rabies Is Different

Because rabies is a life-threatening human health concern, vaccinations are heavily dictated by state and/or local municipalities. Rabies titer tests are available, but the titer test is not accepted by law enforcement. If your dog bites a person, the dog will be considered unvaccinated.

If your dog really shouldn't receive a rabies vaccine for his own health reasons (e.g., severe anaphylactic reaction to rabies vaccine in the past, immune-mediated disease, severely debilitated condition), some municipalities will accept a letter from your veterinarian stating why it is dangerous for your dog to be vaccinated and allow an exemption.

Bottom Line

Vaccines have been saving lives for centuries, but without research to prove what's best for old or ill dogs, it's difficult to know exactly what that is. Partnering with a veterinarian you trust and who knows your dog will get you there.■

(lumps, continued from page 1)

include the mast cell tumor (malignant) and the histiocytoma (benign).

A negative cytology means no cancer cells were noted and allows you to simply monitor the lump. If anything changes, alert your veterinarian.

The downside of FNA/cytology is that the tiny sample that is obtained may not be fully representative of the growth. Additionally, some tumors do not shed their cells easily, which also can lead to inconclusive or false negative results.

When You Need a Biopsy

If your veterinarian is suspicious of a lump despite negative cytology, the next diagnostic step is a biopsy (histopathology). With a biopsy, a piece of the growth is removed and sent to a pathology lab. This procedure requires either sedation and local or general anesthesia, depending on where the lump is. Your dog will have sutures and post-op recovery restrictions.

The upside of a biopsy/histopathology is that it gets a more fully representative sample of the growth, which allows the pathologist to examine not only the cells involved, but the architecture of the lump as well. It's rare to get inconclusive results with a biopsy.

Regularly inspect your dog for lumps, such as at every grooming. If you see something suspicious, call your veterinarian. It's far better to be safe than sorry here, as some bad growths can masquerade as harmless.■

The Cancerous Lump

1. Lipoma. Benign. A common finding in the fat of older dogs.

2. Mast cell tumor. Cancer. Low-grade tumors may be cured with surgery.

3. Sebaceous adenoma. Benign. Small growths in the oily glands in the skin.

4. Skin tags. Benign. The cause of these small stalky growths is unknown, but may be due to irritation to the skin.