

Points on Pets: Keep up vaccinations, those diseases aren't shot

by R.G._Elmor_DVM

Q: While our puppy was being vaccinated recently, our veterinarian mentioned in passing that she had never seen a case of distemper in dogs. This caused us to start thinking about why veterinarians vaccinate dogs for diseases that are no longer diagnosed. If distemper has been eradicated why should we spend our hard earned money for vaccinating our dog against it? We have great confidence in our veterinarian. However, we are beginning to worry about if she really is more interested in our dog's well-being or her income.

A: It is true that many of the diseases that were regularly seen in dogs in the past are no longer commonly diagnosed by today's veterinarians. Many of the new veterinarians graduating from our veterinary colleges have never seen cases of distemper or rabies in dogs. However, the viruses causing diseases such as rabies and distemper are still in our environment and are very serious threats to unvaccinated animals. Fortunately both of these diseases are easily prevented in dogs by vigilant, well-planned vaccination programs.

The threat of distemper is still great throughout the United States, particularly in puppies between the ages of 3 and 6 months. The distemper virus is spread between dogs by contact with infected nasal and ocular discharges, urine and feces. It is important to remember that distemper can be transmitted through the air. It is also important to know that wild carnivores can carry the disease. Of course wildlife reservoirs have become increasingly more important as more families move to rural areas to avoid the stresses of city life.

Fever, ocular and nasal discharges, weight loss, coughing, vomiting and diarrhea are common signs of distemper in dogs. Some dogs with distemper exhibit "fits" which include episodes of twitching and incoordination. Some of these dogs progress to becoming paralyzed. In the past canine distemper was known as "hardpad" because of the thickening that sometimes occurs on the feet of affected dogs.

The diagnosis of distemper is usually based on the clinical signs seen and the history of lack of vaccination for the disease. Unfortunately, treatment for distemper is often unsuccessful once the clinical signs are seen.

Vaccination programs designed to protect our pets against devastating diseases are inexpensive insurance prescribed to prevent unnecessary suffering and loss. Professional ethics dictate that veterinarians not recommend unnecessary vaccinations or procedures. Your dog's well-being is the most important consideration for your veterinarian.

Q: Is it OK to give a 12-week-old puppy a bath? Our new yellow lab loves to play outside and has gotten himself very dirty. We want to give him a bath, but are worried about him getting a cold. This is our first puppy and we want to do everything correctly.

A: You will find varying opinions regarding giving puppies baths. However, common sense dictates that dirty puppies should be bathed. It is true that excessive bathing can cause loss of beneficial skin oils and moisture. You should consult your veterinarian about a complete wellness program for your new family member, including proper bathing techniques.

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