

Vaccine Reactions

Whenever your pet receives vaccinations, there is always a small risk that a vaccine reaction may occur. Vaccine reactions range from the completely harmless lump under the skin to potentially life-threatening anaphylactic shock. The more common reactions include:

Lumps, Bumps, and Masses: The location where the vaccine was administered may occasionally swell or develop a localized reaction by the body. A tiny, BB-sized lump may be detected under the skin, or a larger fluid-filled swelling (seroma or hematoma) may occur. These reactions should be checked by a veterinarian, but are usually completely harmless and will resolve with time. It is rare to get vaccine related sarcomas (tumors) in cats.

Pain, Lethargy, Fever, and Shivering: These reactions occur the most commonly, especially in very small or very young animals. A slight fever is a normal response to vaccination. Any reaction that is of concern to you should be evaluated by a veterinarian. Most animals are back to normal within 24 hours of receiving their vaccinations.

Allergic reactions (Hives, Urticaria, Wheals): If an animal is actually allergic to a component of the vaccine, there can be swelling of the face, lips, and eyelids, or numerous round hives may appear all over the body. This type of reaction most often occurs within 2 hours of vaccination, but may occur even later. The hives occur internally as well as externally, and if they progress breathing difficulty may develop. Every allergic reaction should be seen by a veterinarian immediately so that antihistamines and cortisone may be administered. It is important to determine which vaccine component(s) may have caused the reaction so that measures can be taken to prevent a recurrence of the allergic reaction.

Anaphylactic Shock/Death: Unfortunately, and extremely rarely, an animal may go into shock and possibly even die from a severe, systemic reaction to a vaccine. This type of reaction most often occurs within the first 20 to 30 minutes after vaccination, and can occur almost immediately upon vaccination. With immediate treatment and medical support, some of these animals can be saved. There is no way to predict which animal may react to what vaccine. Signs of anaphylactic shock revolve around collapse of the circulatory system: fainting/weakness/collapse, blue mucous membranes (gums), restlessness, diarrhea, vomiting, seizures, coma, and death. Bee stings and certain medications in sensitive animals can cause similar reactions in animals and in people.

What can you do to minimize the occurrence of vaccine reactions?

1. Be sure your pet is as calm as possible before vaccinations - animals that are unruly will often get lumps and bumps where they were vaccinated.

2. Spread the vaccinations apart - only vaccinate with one or two vaccines at any one visit. This step requires more frequent trips to the clinic, but makes it easier to determine which vaccine is the culprit when reactions do occur.

3. Stay in the clinic for 20 to 30 minutes after vaccinations. If a reaction occurs within this time period, you are a few steps away from medical aid. Pets that experience anaphylactic shock during a car trip home are at greater risk due to the time lost in transit.

4. Remember that vaccine reactions are rare - the diseases that the vaccines help prevent are extremely widespread and occur commonly. Your pet is far safer receiving vaccines than it would be to not get vaccines for fear of a reaction. Talk to your veterinarian if you have any questions or concerns about vaccine reactions.

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