

Educating Clients About Modified Vaccination Protocols

You don't want ill-informed clients to assume three-year vaccines mean wellness exams are only needed every three years.

By Wendy S. Myers



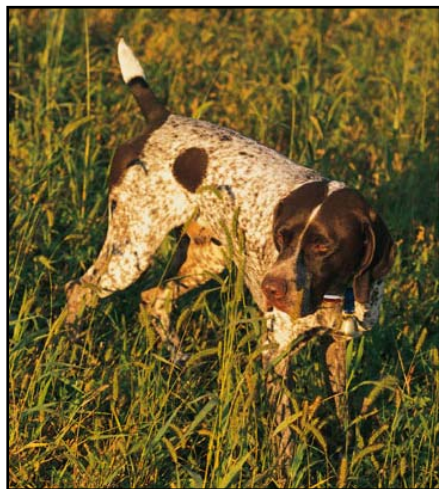
During an onsite consultation, I shadowed a doctor and technician in the exam room. The client's two cats needed wellness exams, vaccinations and intestinal parasite screens. The veterinarian asked risk-assessment questions and confirmed that both female spayed cats stayed indoors exclusively. When reviewing the medical record, the doctor saw the client had another cat at home and asked about its indoor/outdoor status. The client explained that the intact male cat stayed mostly indoors but was allowed to go out one night a month "Just to be a boy."

The behavior of one cat in this three-cat household defined vaccination protocols for all. "Boys' Night Out" increased the risk of infectious diseases and parasites for all of the cats. This risk behavior changed the veterinarian's approach to vaccinations and diagnostic testing. The doctor explained which vaccines the cats needed and why some are administered every three years while others may be given annually.

If your practice is considering or has already implemented extended protocols, educating clients is critical to ensure regular veterinary visits for all wellness services, not just vaccines. For decades, we've trained clients to visit us when vaccinations are due. But seeing a veterinarian for regular wellness exams and diagnostic testing is equally important. You don't want ill-informed clients to assume three-year vaccines mean wellness exams are only needed every three years.

In fact, many practices are transitioning from annual exams to twice-a-year wellness exams. "Twice a Year for Life" is the message of National Pet Wellness Month (www.npwm.com), which is supported by AVMA and Fort Dodge Animal Health. Clients need to understand veterinarians' role in prevention and wellness. Tailoring vaccination protocols based on the age, health status and lifestyle of individual patients is good medicine. Follow these steps to teach clients about extended protocols:

1. Ask risk-assessment questions. Question clients every wellness visit because people's



lifestyles change frequently. Did they buy a lake home? Did they buy a condo in the mountains? Do they travel with their pet? Answers will determine what vaccines are core and non-core for each patient. Acute or chronic diseases also may influence the doctor's decision.

To download a risk-assessment form, visit the National Pet Wellness Month website at www.npwm.com or ask your Fort Dodge Animal Health representative for NCR two-part forms. Keep one copy of the risk-assessment form in the medical record and send the other home with the client. This

emphasizes the importance of seeing the veterinarian regularly for personalized healthcare.

2. Use the term “need” instead of “recommend.” Clients want specific advice on what medical services and products their pets need for optimal wellness. Vaccine protocols are chosen for each patient using the veterinarian's professional judgment. Dr. Stephen B. Jaffe, director of Field Veterinary Services for Fort Dodge Animal Health, recommends telling clients, *“Based on today's exam findings and risk assessment, your pet requires the following vaccines. On our next visit, we will consider any changes that have occurred and then administer the appropriate vaccines. My goal is to protect your pet from infectious disease using the most current science and vaccine products.”*

3. Provide a vaccination brochure or handout. When transitioning from annual to extended protocols, increase clients' knowledge with both personal conversations and written materials. The 2003 AAHA compliance study, “A Path to High-Quality Care,” found 80 percent of clients want both verbal and written instructions.

Pharmaceutical companies and associations such as AVMA, AAHA and AAFP offer client brochures on vaccinations. Provide vaccine health records and checklists for puppy and kitten owners so they don't miss future boosters. For adult pets, create a practice handout on core and non-core vaccines and the frequency of administration so clients understand your protocols.

4. Use an exam report card to summarize findings and recommendations. Remember, 87 percent of clients are women and many must explain details to other family members. Having written information ensures accuracy as well as compliance. You can download and personalize a wellness exam report from www.npwm.com.

Exam report cards for puppy, kitten, adult and senior pets also are featured in *The Veterinary Practice Management Resource Book & CD* (720-344-2347, www.csvets.com). Forms on the CD are in Microsoft Word so you can tailor the checklist of vaccines to your protocols.



5. Change wording on your reminders. Some reminders list specific vaccines that are due. This approach has two dangers. First, you may or may not give the vaccines listed after the physical exam findings and risk-assessment questions. Secondly, you've sent a "shopping list" of vaccines to clients. If they're price sensitive, they now have the detailed list to call other practices to see who has the best deal.

Instead, use a statement such as "Your pet is now due for vaccinations" or "Your pet is due for an assessment of vaccination needs." Here is a reminder for twice-a-year exams that emphasizes comprehensive wellness services:

Dear (*pet's name*):

Do you realize it's been three "pet years" since we've seen you? It's now time for your six-month checkup, which includes:

- ✓ A physical exam for early disease detection
- ✓ An oral exam to check teeth and gums
- ✓ An assessment of your vaccination needs
- ✓ Intestinal parasite screen, which the Centers for Disease Control recommends every six months
- ✓ Heartworm test
- ✓ Discussion of home dental care
- ✓ Wellness blood and urine baseline screen

Please ask your family to call us at 555-555-5555 to schedule a wellness exam to keep you in optimal health.

6. Include vaccination and wellness messages in all client communication tools.

Communicate your practice's vaccination protocols through posters, brochures, your website, message on hold, reminders, bulletin board in the reception area and invoices. Consistent messages will increase clients' understanding of extended vaccination protocols. Make sure you position your practice as the #1 trusted resource for vaccine information. Too many sources—from breeders to the Internet—are confusing clients. The risk of unvaccinated pets has significant consequences for both animals and people, so be a great patient advocate and client educator.

About the Author:



Wendy S. Myers owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Denver. Her consulting firm helps teams improve compliance, client service and practice management. Communication Solutions for Veterinarians has provided mystery phone shopper training to more than 2,600 receptionists nationwide. Wendy is a partner in Animal Hospital Specialty Center, a 13-doctor AAHA-accredited referral practice offering internal medicine, surgery, neurology, oncology, specialty dentistry, and emergency care in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. She is the author of four books and five videos. Subscribe to Communication Solutions for Veterinarians' e-newsletter on our website at: www.csvets.com. E-mail Wendy at: wmyers@csvets.com.