

Understanding Your Dog's Vaccine Schedule — A Guide for Pet Owners

Important: This guide explains how our vaccine scheduling tool works. It is for educational purposes only and is **not a substitute for veterinary advice**. Always consult your veterinarian before making decisions about your dog's vaccinations.

How This Tool Works

Our vaccine scheduler creates a personalized vaccination timeline for your dog based on their age, lifestyle, and health history. The schedule follows the same guidelines used by veterinary organizations across the world (AAHA and WSAVA — the leading authorities on pet vaccination).

The tool also checks for health conditions and medications that may make certain vaccines unsafe, and flags those with clear warnings.

Types of Vaccines

There are two important distinctions to understand:

Core vs. Non-Core

- **Core vaccines** are recommended for every dog, regardless of lifestyle. They protect against serious, widespread diseases.
- **Non-core vaccines** are recommended only for dogs whose lifestyle puts them at risk (e.g., dogs that go to dog parks, boarding, or live in tick-heavy areas).

How Vaccines Are Made

- **Live vaccines** (also called "modified-live") use a weakened version of the virus that teaches the immune system to fight the real thing. These are very effective but are **not safe** for dogs with weakened immune systems.

- **Inactive vaccines** (also called "killed") use a deactivated version of the virus. These are generally safer for dogs with health issues, but may not work well if the immune system is severely compromised.

This distinction matters because certain health conditions make live vaccines dangerous — our tool flags these automatically.

Vaccines in the Schedule

Core Vaccines (Recommended for All Dogs)

DHPP — The "Puppy Shot"

What it protects against:

- **Distemper** — A serious virus that attacks the nervous system, lungs, and gut. Often fatal in puppies.
- **Hepatitis (Adenovirus)** — Causes liver disease and respiratory illness.
- **Parvovirus** — A highly contagious virus that causes severe vomiting and bloody diarrhea. Can be fatal, especially in young puppies.
- **Parainfluenza** — A respiratory virus that contributes to "kennel cough."

Vaccine type: Live vaccine

Schedule:

- Puppies (under 16 weeks): 3 doses, spaced about 4 weeks apart
- Older dogs: 2 doses, spaced about 4 weeks apart
- First booster: 1 year after the last dose
- After that: Every 3 years

Important rule: The final puppy dose must be given after 16 weeks of age. This is because puppies receive temporary immunity from their mother's milk, which can interfere with the vaccine. By 16 weeks, this temporary protection has faded enough for the vaccine to work properly.

Normal reactions: Soreness at the injection site, tiredness, low fever, or a small bump at the injection site for up to 2 weeks.

Call your vet if you see: Swelling of the face, hives, vomiting, diarrhea, difficulty breathing, or symptoms lasting more than 2 days.

Rabies

What it protects against:

- **Rabies** — A fatal virus that attacks the brain and nervous system. It can spread to humans through bites. Rabies vaccination is **required by law** in most places.

Vaccine type: Inactive vaccine

Schedule:

- 1 dose at 12 weeks or older
- Booster at 1 year
- After that: Every 3 years

Normal reactions: Mild fever, tiredness, soreness at the injection site, or a small painless lump that may last 1-2 weeks.

Call your vet if you see: Face swelling, hives, difficulty breathing, vomiting, diarrhea, or a growing/painful lump at the injection site.

Leptospirosis

What it protects against:

- **Leptospirosis** — A bacterial infection spread through contaminated water and wildlife urine. It can cause kidney and liver failure, and **can spread to humans**.

Vaccine type: Inactive vaccine

Schedule:

- 2 doses, spaced about 4 weeks apart (starting at 12 weeks)
- Booster: Every year

Special note: This vaccine has the highest reaction rate of all common dog vaccines. Small dogs (under 10 lbs) may be at higher risk for reactions. Dogs with seizure disorders should generally avoid

this vaccine unless they have significant exposure risk.

Normal reactions: Mild swelling at the injection site, tiredness, low fever, or decreased appetite for 1-2 days.

Call your vet if you see: Face or leg swelling, hives, vomiting, diarrhea, or difficulty breathing.

Non-Core Vaccines (Based on Lifestyle)

Lyme Disease

What it protects against:

- **Lyme disease** — Spread by ticks, this infection causes joint pain, fever, and can lead to kidney damage.

Who needs it: Dogs that spend time in wooded areas, tall grass, or regions where deer ticks are common.

Vaccine type: Inactive vaccine

Schedule:

- 2 doses, spaced about 4 weeks apart (starting at 12 weeks)
- Booster: Every year

Normal reactions: Tenderness at the injection site, tiredness for 1-2 days, mild fever.

Call your vet if you see: Face swelling, hives, severe itching, vomiting, or difficulty breathing.

Bordetella (Kennel Cough) — Nose Drops or Oral

What it protects against:

- **Kennel cough** — A highly contagious cough and respiratory infection that spreads easily in places where dogs are close together.

Who needs it: Dogs that go to boarding, daycare, grooming, dog parks, or training classes.

Vaccine type: Live vaccine (given as nose drops or by mouth)

Schedule:

- 1 dose (starting at 8 weeks)
- Booster: Every year

Normal reactions: Sneezing, coughing, or runny nose (this is the normal immune response from nose drops), mild tiredness.

Call your vet if you see: Face swelling, hives, vomiting, difficulty breathing, or cold-like symptoms lasting more than a few days.

Bordetella (Kennel Cough) — Injectable

What it protects against: Same as above — kennel cough. This is the injection version, used when nose drops aren't practical.

Vaccine type: Inactive vaccine (given as an injection)

Schedule:

- 2 doses, spaced about 4 weeks apart (starting at 8 weeks)
- Booster: Every year

Normal reactions: Lump or tenderness at the injection site, tiredness, mild fever, decreased appetite.

Call your vet if you see: Face swelling, hives, vomiting, difficulty breathing, or symptoms lasting more than 2 days.

Canine Influenza (Dog Flu)

What it protects against:

- **Dog flu** — Two strains of influenza virus (H3N8 and H3N2) that cause coughing, fever, and respiratory illness. Very contagious among dogs.

Who needs it: Dogs in social settings, multi-dog households, boarding, or areas with known dog flu outbreaks.

Vaccine type: Inactive vaccine

Schedule:

- 2 doses, spaced about 4 weeks apart (starting at 8 weeks)
- Booster: Every year

Normal reactions: Sleepiness, soreness at the injection site.

Call your vet if you see: Vomiting, diarrhea, hives, face swelling, difficulty breathing, or severe tiredness.

How We Recommend Non-Core Vaccines

Our tool asks about your dog's lifestyle and environment, then automatically recommends the appropriate non-core vaccines:

Your dog's lifestyle	Vaccines recommended
Goes to daycare, boarding, dog parks, or travels to shows	Bordetella + Canine Influenza
Spends time in wooded or grassy areas with ticks	Lyme Disease
Indoor-only with no social settings	Non-core vaccines typically not needed

Health Screening

Before generating a schedule, our tool asks 6 health questions about your dog. Here's what each one means and why it matters:

1. "Has your dog had a vaccine reaction before?"

If **yes**: The schedule will flag all vaccines with a warning to consult your vet before vaccinating. A blood test (titer test) may be a better option to check if your dog already has immunity.

2. "Is your dog on prescription medications?"

If **yes**: A note is added reminding you to discuss vaccine timing with your vet, since some medications may affect how well vaccines work.

3. "Does your dog have a chronic medical condition?"

If **yes**: A note is added reminding you to discuss vaccine safety with your vet.

4. "Does your dog have an immune system disorder?"

If **yes**: All vaccines are flagged with a warning. A blood test (titer test) is recommended instead of revaccination, since revaccinating can sometimes worsen immune disorders.

5. "Is your dog on immune-suppressing medications?"

If **yes**: This is the most serious flag.

- **Live vaccines are blocked** — they could make your dog sick because the immune system can't fight off even the weakened vaccine virus.
- **Inactive vaccines carry a caution** — they may not work well while the immune system is suppressed.

6. "Is your dog pregnant or being used for breeding?"

If **yes**:

- **Live vaccines are blocked** — they could harm the unborn puppies.
- **Inactive vaccines carry a caution** — consult your vet first.

Medical Conditions That Affect Vaccination

If you report that your dog has certain medical conditions, the tool applies additional safety rules:

Epilepsy (Seizure Disorder)

Dogs with epilepsy need extra care when vaccinating:

- **DHPP:** Should be given separately from other vaccines, with 3-4 weeks between each vaccine. Ask your vet about a safer version of the distemper component (called "recombinant").
- **Rabies:** Use the 3-year schedule if allowed in your area. Give separately from other vaccines. Watch for seizure changes for 30 days after.
- **Leptospirosis:** **Avoid** unless your dog has a real risk of exposure (e.g., drinks from ponds, encounters wildlife). This vaccine has the highest reaction rate and has been linked to neurological side effects.
- **All non-core vaccines:** Only give if your dog truly needs them based on their lifestyle.

Flea & Tick Medication Warning:

The FDA has issued a warning about certain popular flea and tick medications causing seizures in dogs. If your dog has epilepsy, **avoid** these products:

- NexGard
- Bravecto
- Simparica
- Credelio

Safer alternatives for epileptic dogs:

- Frontline (topical)
- Revolution (topical)
- Comfortis (oral tablet, different type of medication)

The Seresto flea collar has also had reports of neurological problems — use with caution and watch your dog closely.

Autoimmune Disease

Autoimmune diseases (like IMHA, ITP, Lupus, or Pemphigus) cause the immune system to attack the dog's own body. Vaccination needs special care:

- **During a flare-up:** Do NOT vaccinate. Wait until the disease is under control.
- **Blood tests (titer testing):** Recommended instead of revaccination. This checks if your dog already has immunity without stimulating the immune system.
- **Live vaccines while on immune-suppressing medications: Blocked.** The weakened virus in the vaccine could cause actual disease when the immune system is suppressed. Wait 2-4 weeks after stopping the medication.

- **Apoquel (oclacitinib): All vaccines are blocked** while your dog is on Apoquel and for 28 days after stopping it. Apoquel suppresses the immune system so strongly that live vaccines could cause illness and inactive vaccines won't work.

Common immune-suppressing medications:

- Prednisone / Prednisolone
- Dexamethasone
- Cyclosporine (Atopica)
- Azathioprine (Imuran)
- Mycophenolate (CellCept)
- Apoquel (oclacitinib) — most restrictive

Cancer / Chemotherapy

If your dog has cancer or is receiving chemotherapy:

- **Live vaccines are blocked** during treatment. Chemotherapy weakens the immune system so much that even the weakened vaccine virus could cause disease.
- **Inactive vaccines won't work well** during active chemotherapy because the immune system is too suppressed to build protection.
- **Wait at least 2 weeks** (ideally 4-8 weeks) after finishing chemotherapy before vaccinating.
- **Best approach:** If you know your dog will start chemo, try to get vaccinations done at least 2 weeks before treatment begins.
- **Blood tests (titer testing)** are the safest way to check your dog's immunity during or after cancer treatment.

Common chemotherapy drugs:

- Cyclophosphamide
- Doxorubicin
- Vincristine
- Carboplatin
- Lomustine (CCNU)
- Chlorambucil

Quick Reference — What Gets Blocked and What Gets Flagged

Situation	Live vaccines	Inactive vaccines
On immune-suppressing medications	Blocked	Caution
Pregnant or breeding	Blocked	Caution
Immune system disorder	Warning	Warning
Previous vaccine reaction	Warning	Warning
On prescription medications	Note	Note
Chronic condition	Note	Note
Epilepsy + standard vaccines	Caution	Caution
Epilepsy + Leptospirosis	—	Avoid if possible
Autoimmune + Apoquel	Blocked	Blocked
On chemotherapy	Blocked	Blocked (defer)

Blocked = The tool will not let you mark this vaccine as done and shows a red "CONTRAINDICATED" badge.

Caution/Warning = The tool shows a yellow "VET CONSULT ADVISED" badge.

Note = Informational message displayed on the vaccine card.

Vaccine Schedule at a Glance

Vaccine	For all dogs?	Starting age	How many shots?	Boosters
DHPP	Yes	6 weeks	Puppies: 3, Adults: 2	1 year, then every 3 years
Rabies	Yes (legally required)	12 weeks	1	1 year, then every 3 years

Vaccine	For all dogs?	Starting age	How many shots?	Boosters
Leptospirosis	Depends on risk	12 weeks	2	Every year
Lyme Disease	Tick-exposed dogs	12 weeks	2	Every year
Bordetella (nose drops)	Social dogs	8 weeks	1	Every year
Bordetella (injection)	Social dogs	8 weeks	2	Every year
Dog Flu	Social dogs	8 weeks	2	Every year

Where Do These Rules Come From?

Our vaccination rules are based on guidelines published by:

1. **AAHA** (American Animal Hospital Association) — The leading authority on companion animal healthcare in North America. Their 2024 vaccination guidelines are used by veterinary clinics nationwide.
2. **WSAVA** (World Small Animal Veterinary Association) — The global authority on small animal vaccination. Their 2024 guidelines are used by veterinarians worldwide.
3. **FDA** (U.S. Food & Drug Administration) — Issued a safety alert in 2018 about certain flea/tick medications and seizure risk.

This guide was created to help you understand your dog's vaccine schedule. It is not a substitute for professional veterinary advice. Always consult your veterinarian for decisions about your dog's health. Last updated: February 2026.