




# Feline Vaccinations

**Are your customers having this  
discussion with their clients?**

By Laura Thill



If cat owners aren't vaccinating their cats, it's likely because they aren't aware of the benefits of doing so — or the risks of putting it off. Not only does the cost of treating a disease far outweigh the expense of vaccination, if cat owners become increasingly lax about vaccinating their pets, the risk of old diseases returning increases, according to experts. "Routine vaccinations have been one of the most significant advances in preventing feline diseases and ensuring a greater quality of life for pet cats," says Arne Zislin, VMD, MBA, technical manager at Boehringer-Ingelheim Vetmedica Inc. Yet, for the past 15 to 20 years, fewer pet owners have taken their pets for wellness checkups and vaccinations, he notes.

"Lack of awareness of what is needed to maintain the best quality of life for their cats, the economy and the perceived difficulty of transporting a cat in a carrier, in a car, to the veterinarian's office, and then back home, have all contributed to this decline," he says. "We need to educate cat owners on the importance of good preventive healthcare through appropriate vaccination, that vaccines are more affordable than they may think, and make it easier for them to transport their cats to and from the veterinary hospital."

The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) has developed the Cat Friendly Practice program in an attempt to help veterinarians and their staff make their practices more welcoming to cats and their owners, he adds. (See related article in this issue.)

"Infectious diseases are very real risks to cats, and vaccines are absolutely important," adds Bob Menardi, DVM, Merial. "We all invest in our own health in different ways." If we are convinced that we are at risk, we do what is necessary to protect ourselves, he says. "Likewise, it's the veterinarian's responsibility to educate [his or her] clientele. Pet owners in general want what is best for their cat. If they are made aware of the risk to their cat, I believe they will follow through with vaccinations."

### **A good starting point**

Distributor sales reps can play an important role in helping their customers educate clients about the necessity of vaccinating their cat. For one, the AAFP vaccination guidelines

provide current information for veterinarians on preventive health programs. "They are a good starting point for veterinarians to optimize their own preventive health programs and ultimately the quality of life for their feline patients," says Zislin. Core vaccinations, which cover panleukopenia virus (FVP), herpesvirus-1 (FHV-1), feline calicivirus (FCV), and rabies, are essential. "These diseases can cause severe morbidity and sometimes death in infected cats," he says. Non-core vaccinations, which protect against diseases such as feline leukemia virus (FeLV), *Chlamydomydia felis* and *Bordetella*, should be recommended based on a cat's lifestyle and risk. "Outdoor cats are at higher risk for FeLV, while boarded cats may be candidates for the *Chlamydomydia felis* and *Bordetella* vaccines," he says. "So, doctors must

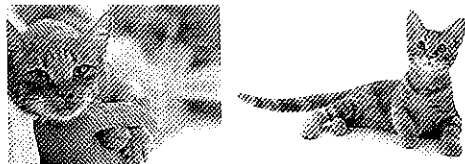
**"The bottom line is, while vaccinations are a medical procedure and as such carry some risk, that risk is very, very low."**

— Bob Menardi, DVM, Merial

be doing routine risk assessment on every cat, and asking the right questions, in order to provide the best preventive health program for every patient.

"It's always best to consider what is right for each patient," he continues. "The AAFP recommends vaccinating healthy cats. Veterinarians must get a complete patient history and have a thorough discussion with the owner about their cat's health."

Menardi agrees. "To effectively stimulate an immune response, we must start with a healthy cat," he explains. "So the rule of thumb is to ensure the cat is healthy before vaccinating. As such, any good vaccination program begins with a physical exam and history. Also, the number of vaccines a kitten receives in a vaccination series is less important than the age of the kitten at the final vaccination. The kitten's vaccine series is the most important vaccine program a cat will have in its life, so you want to be certain the kitten's immune system is most receptive."



## Preparing pet cats for summer vacation

As pet owners gear up for summer vacations, this is an opportunity for your veterinarian customers to educate them on the necessary vaccines to ensure safe travels and boarding.

Travel and boarding can be stressful for cats and increases the risk of exposure to pathogens, according to Kathleen Heaney, DVM, director of technical services, Companion Animal Business Unit, Merck Animal Health. "In these situations, the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) suggests that cats that have not been vaccinated in the preceding year may be boosted against feline panleukopenia, herpes virus and calicivirus seven to 10 days prior to boarding," she says. "They should also be up to date on the rabies vaccine, as well as microchipped and registered in a reputable pet recovery database. It is advisable for the client to keep a copy of the vaccination records with him or her while traveling – particularly documentation of rabies vaccination.

"In addition, cats that are boarded or reside in households in which their canine counterparts are boarded, may be exposed to other respiratory pathogens, and additional vaccinations may be warranted," Heaney continues. "For example, while pet owners may be aware that dogs that are boarded are at greater risk

for *Bordetella bronchiseptica* (as well as other respiratory pathogens), many owners don't realize that *Bordetella* can be transmitted between dogs and cats. Fortunately, there is a feline *Bordetella* vaccine that is available for cats at risk."

Whether pet cats accompany their owners on vacation this summer, are boarded or simply stay home, warm weather presents a greater opportunity for them to spend time outdoors, making vaccination that much more important. "Vaccination protocols should be customized based on the lifestyle of the individual cat with respect to exposure to disease, as well as the age and overall health of the cat," says Heaney. "Pet owners may not be fully aware of all the risks their cat may encounter. For example, young cats are at greater risk for feline leukemia virus (FeLV) infection. While a pet owner might initially intend for their cat to remain indoors, many times young indoor cats become indoor/outdoor cats, putting them at greater risk for FeLV exposure.

"If a cat is ill or immunologically compromised, then vaccinations may be deferred to when the cat is in good health and can respond appropriately, or deferred indefinitely," she says. "Ultimately, the decision to vaccinate is based on the benefits outweighing the risks of vaccination."

Vaccination programs should begin around the kitten's eighth week and continue every two to three weeks until about 16 to 20 weeks of age, he adds.

That said, "older cats can respond to a vaccine just as well as a younger cat," says Zislin. "For a cat with chronic disease showing clinical signs at a visit to the veterinarian, vaccination should be deferred until the symptoms are under control," he says.

### Benefits outweigh the risks

Some veterinarians and their clients might be concerned about risks associated with vaccines, but experts are clear that the benefits of vaccination far outweigh the risks. There are different types of vaccines – inactivated, modified-live and recombinant – and while each type carries certain risks, depending

on how it is manufactured, they are minimal, according to Menardi. "The bottom line is, while vaccinations are a medical procedure and as such carry some risk, that risk is very, very low," he says. "The veterinarian is the most qualified person to weigh the risks and benefits for each patient."

"All vaccines that are licensed by the Department of Agriculture are shown to be safe and efficacious," says Zislin. "A cat's well-being is positively impacted by good preventive care instituted by the veterinarian, not the specific formulation of vaccine. Whether modified-live, inactivated or recombinant, the purpose of a vaccine is the same – to activate the cat's immune system to protect it from acquiring disease following challenge in its environment."

One way veterinarians can reduce the risk of adverse reactions occurring is by vaccinating healthy cats only,



# Feline Friendly

Menardi says. "Yes, vaccinating a cat with an immunosuppressive illness can lead to issues, but that's why it's so important to vaccinate healthy cats," he says. "You want an immune system you know will respond to the vaccine, and if there are any health issues, you must address those first." In addition, most vaccines are not tested with pregnant cats in mind, he points out. "It's a good idea to wait and, in the meantime, limit the cat's risk of exposure to disease."

The risk of cats developing injection-site sarcomas also has given vaccines a bad rap. "In the 1990s, the Vaccine-Associated Feline Sarcoma Task Force (VAFSTF) was formed to research the causes of sarcomas in cats at

as smartphones, texting, email, Facebook and Twitter. "This is the way people communicate today, and if veterinarians don't do so, they will miss opportunities to connect with clients," he says. "Successful veterinary practices use all of these tools," he adds. Staying on top of patients requires a lot of work, he admits. But it can have a huge impact on the wellbeing of patients and help veterinarians strengthen their relationship with their clients.

Distributor sales reps that know their products well and share supporting data and materials for their customers will be the most helpful, says Menardi. "They should ask their customers at each practice about their general philosophy about

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injection sites, now termed feline injection site sarcomas (FISS)," says Zislin. "Studies were funded, projects were completed and a final report was issued by the group in 2005. The conclusion was that FISS were very rare and likely to occur in a small population of genetically-predisposed cats. The benefits of vaccination far outweigh the risks. If we stopped vaccinating cats, diseases we haven't seen for years would start to return."

## Connecting with your customers

Sales reps can be a "huge asset" to veterinarian practices looking to advance their feline vaccine programs, suggests Zislin. "They can provide educational tools, such as lunch-and-learns, to train veterinarians and their staff," he says. "Even more importantly, they can share best practices that work at other practices they visit."

"Most veterinary practices don't have the resources to monitor clients and continually remind them to come back to the practice for their pet's checkups and vaccinations," he continues. Sales reps can encourage their veterinary customers to take advantage of current technologies, such

vaccinations and learn which diseases are important to vaccinate against." Some veterinarians might question whether a new vaccine is important or necessary, and whether it poses a risk to patients, he adds.

The more sales reps know about what diseases their customers see in their practice, the better they can serve them, Menardi continues. "Veterinarians know what diseases their patients are at risk for and what their needs are," he says. When distributor sales reps can provide solutions to support those needs, it's a win-win for everyone."

"Veterinarians don't want to do anything that will harm their clients' pets," adds Zislin. "They are trained to act on scientific information. Sales reps should be well educated and able to communicate the most recent scientific data to their customers."

"We have good information that vaccinating cats at appropriate intervals protects them from disease," says Zislin. "We need to increase awareness and educate pet owners on the importance of vaccines, their affordability, and make it easier for them to transport their cats to the doctor's office and back home." ■



## The Cat-Friendly Practice

Why are cats the underdogs when it comes to veterinary care?  
How can your customers get them back on top?

For many cat owners, the veterinarian is the option of last resort. In fact, nearly four in 10 cat owners say they would take their animal to the veterinarian only if it were sick, according to survey results from the Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study. Not surprisingly, lack of patient visits results in poor feline health and welfare, and less successful practices.



The estimated U.S. cat population exceeds the number of pet dogs by several million, according to data from the American Veterinary Medical Association. Yet the Bayer study found that 40 percent of pet cats had not been to a veterinarian in the prior year vs. only 15 percent of dogs.

As part of its "toolbox" of offerings for veterinary practices, Partners for Healthy Pets ([www.partnersforhealthy-pets.org](http://www.partnersforhealthy-pets.org)) offers a module on how to develop a feline-friendly practice. Partners for Healthy Pets is a committee of the American Veterinary Medical Foundation, created to ensure pets receive the preventive healthcare they deserve through regular veterinary visits.

The estimated U.S. cat population exceeds the number of pet dogs by several million, according to data from the American Veterinary Medical Association. Yet the Bayer study found that 40 percent of pet cats had not been to a veterinarian in the prior year vs. only 15 percent of dogs. Those numbers add up to one thing: An underserved feline patient population.

The Partners for Healthy Pets tool is designed to help veterinarian practices understand what a cat-friendly practice is, and to help them transform their practices accordingly. Resources include web conferences and videos, informative articles and more.

- A pre-recorded web conference on "Becoming a Cat-Friendly Practice," by Elizabeth J. Collier, DVM, DABVP, past president of the American Association of Feline Practitioners and spokesperson for the AAFP Cat Friendly Practice initiative. This webcast, which provides one hour of CE



# Feline Friendly



## Think like a cat

Do your veterinarian customers want to know the key to increasing cat visits? They should try thinking like a cat, that is, adopt a feline perspective, says Elizabeth J. Colleran, DVM, DABVP, in her web conference on "Becoming a Cat-Friendly Practice," on the Partners for Healthy Pets website. As the veterinary team improves its understanding of feline patients' needs, clients will take note. Ultimately, a stronger relationship between the veterinary practice, the client and the pet will emerge. Cat owners will show up at the practice more often, and visits will be less stressful for all concerned.

Many cat owners don't have a clue about their pets, says Colleran. But veterinary professionals do. It's their job to educate clients about the characteristics of cats, so clients can make better healthcare decisions on behalf of their pets. What are some of those characteristics?

- Cats are solitary survivors. They don't cooperate with one another. They don't have any hierarchy. They need to feel in control of their environment.
- Cats use their entire body – and senses – to understand and communicate with the world.
- Fear is the No. 1 cause of bad behavior in the veterinary setting. "We need to learn how to read the emotional states of our patients and respond accordingly," says Colleran.
- Cats like predictability, which speaks to the importance of controlling their environment.
- In the wild, hunting is a very important skill for the cat. At homes, cats should have opportunities to play and to work at hunting, with various toys.

Understanding these characteristics can help the veterinary team and the owner make visits to the vet less stressful.

credit, suggests strategies to lessen the stress of the veterinary visit for the pet, the owner and the veterinary staff; and how to create a more cat-friendly practice.

- Pre-recorded web conference on "AAFP Feline-Friendly Handling Guidelines," developed by AAFP and the International Society of Feline Medicine, by Ilona Rodan, DVM, DABVP, medical director and owner of the Cat Care Clinic in Madison, Wisc., and founder of Feline-Friendly Consulting. One hour of CE credit.
- Videos on the CATalyst Council Cat-Friendly Practice, designed to help veterinary teams enhance feline visits to the veterinarian. Videos are: "Cats & Carriers: Friends not Foes;" "The Best Place to Examine a

Cat;" "Tips for Examining a Fearful Cat;" "Massage to Calm an Anxious Cat;" "Getting a Cat Out of the Cage;" and "Handling a Cat for Lab Sample Collection." (The CATalyst Council is the outcome of two grassroots efforts – Re-Branding Felix and the CATalyst Summit. A non-profit entity, the CATalyst Council includes three distinct groups: veterinary medicine, shelter/animal welfare, and related industry entities, such as foundations and cat fanciers, the media, and commercial companies.)

• "Pouncing on Opportunity," an article from Trends magazine, with stories and case studies of practices that have successfully implemented cat-friendly techniques. ■

**Editor's note:** Partners for Healthy Pets is a committee of the American Veterinary Medical Foundation created to ensure pets receive the preventive healthcare they deserve through regular veterinary visits. Led by the American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Animal Hospital Association, this is a collaborative alliance of over 110 veterinary associations, colleges of veterinary medicine and animal health companies, all committed to a vision of improved overall health for pets. Partners for Healthy Pets provides tools and resources that help communicate the value and benefit of preventive care, enhance the veterinary-client relationship, and improve the overall quality of preventive healthcare provided for patients. It recently launched a consumer-targeted advertising campaign to promote the importance of annual veterinary checkups. These tools include surveys to help practices gauge their level of client service and satisfaction; guidelines to implementing AAHA/AVMA canine and feline preventive healthcare guidelines; tools to create Internet and social media marketing programs; and more.

## It's tough to fool a cat....

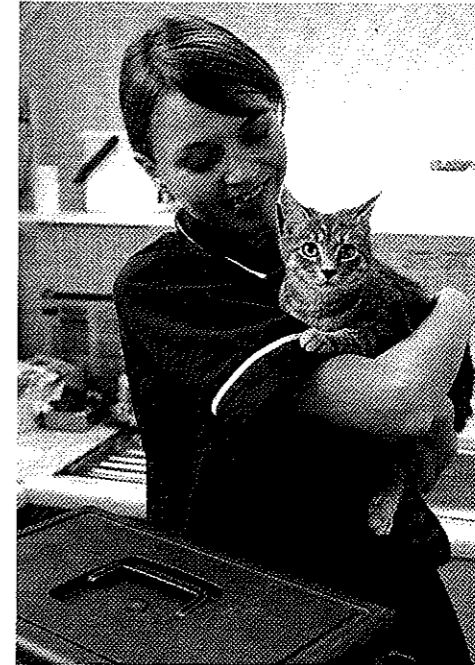
So don't even try

"A cat is usually put in its carrier for one purpose, and that is to be taken to the veterinarian," says Dr. Deana McReynolds of the Broadway Veterinary Hospital and Laser Surgery Center in Seattle, Wash., and a cat-friendly "success story" cited by Partners for Healthy Pets. "The cat knows something is up and that it's not going to be fun. Its natural reaction is to aggressively resist being put in a carrier and to show signs of stress during exams."

McReynolds was convinced that by becoming certified by the American Association of Feline Practitioners as a Cat-Friendly Practice, the practice would attract regular visits from skeptical cat-owner clients. Certification as a Cat-Friendly Practice is awarded by the AAFP to practices that meet 10 criteria designed to serve the unique needs of feline patients. A practice can qualify for silver and gold levels of certification. The process is completed online at the AAFP web site (catvets.com).

Broadway became one of the first CFP-certified hospitals in the nation. "As a result, our staff has become skilled in cat-friendly handling techniques, and we provide a welcoming, low-stress environment for our feline patients."

McReynolds has found the Partners for Healthy Pets "Feline-Friendly Practice" tool to be useful for staff training purposes. "The Partners toolbox is an excellent starting point for any veterinarian, including non-AAFP members, seeking to become more knowledgeable and skilled in handling feline patients," she says. "The Partners site is a one-stop location for resources on how to make a practice more accommodating to cats."



Results? "We've gotten a lot of positive feedback," she says. "Cat owners now tell us how much they appreciate the way we work with their animals and how different our approach is from what they experienced in the past." The practice has seen a dramatic reduction in the number of bites and scratches that the staff has gotten from feline patients. "When the client sees that the cat is calm and manageable in the hands of our healthcare team, they realize that our methods result in a better exam experience."

### Tips for creating a Cat-Friendly Practice

A cat-friendly practice shows its stripes from the time the cat and her owner enter the reception area, to the moment

they leave with instructions in hand, says McReynolds. She offers several tips – published in the Partners for Healthy Pets website – for handling feline patients in a cat-friendly manner.

- Avoid putting cats and dogs in the same room. Establish a cats-only section of the reception area so that feline patients avoid proximity to dogs, which tend to be energetic and loud. Placing a towel over the cat's carrier in the reception area can shield it from the view of other animals.



# Feline Friendly

## Cat-Friendly Certification

By joining the American Association of Feline Practitioners' Cat-Friendly Practice program, practices are guided to assess and implement cat-friendly tactics in 10 different topic areas:

Staff training and continuing education; client communications.

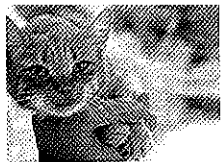
- Veterinary practice/waiting room.
- Feline handling and interaction with clients.
- Examination room and clinical records.
- Wards facilities.
- Pain management/operating room and anesthesia.
- Surgical equipment and dentistry.
- Diagnostic imaging and laboratory facilities.
- Treatment/health and safety.
- Preventative care by life stages.



Use synthetic pheromones to reduce anxiety in feline patients. Wrapping a cat in a towel treated with a commercial pheromone spray often has a calming effect.

- Bring cats to the exam room as soon as possible after arrival. This avoids fear escalation, which can result when a newly arriving cat encounters other animals in the reception area. Give cats 10 to 15 minutes prior to the exam to become acquainted with its surroundings.
- Conduct all procedures (patient history, obtaining vital signs, the physical exam itself, treatment, and client discussion) in the same room whenever possible. This avoids subjecting the feline patient to the stress of moving to several areas of the clinic.
- Use a stuffed animal to train staff in gentle feline restraint methods, such as wrapping a cat in a towel to simultaneously provide security and facilitate the physical exam.
- Avoid exposing cats to strange smells. Clean the exam room with a scent-neutral agent after each patient leaves to prevent exposing incoming cats to odors from dogs and other feline patients.
- Use synthetic pheromones to reduce anxiety in feline patients. Wrapping a cat in a towel treated with a commercial pheromone spray often has a calming effect.
- A cat-friendly approach is mostly about preventing a cat's anxiety level from escalating to fear and aggression, and less about the way the cat is physically handled.
- Visit the Partners for Healthy Pets web site, "Feline Friendly Practice" Resources Toolbox page and spend some time exploring.

McReynolds also advises veterinary practices to pick up a copy of Dr. Sophia Yin's book *Low Stress Handling, Restraint and Behavior Modification of Dogs and Cats: Techniques for Developing Patients Who Love Their Visits*. It's an excellent multimedia reference, she says. ■



## Feline handling guidelines

Cats are the most popular pet in many countries, and yet they are the underdog when it comes to veterinary care, says Ilona Rodan, DVM, DABVP, medical director and owner of the Cat Care Clinic in Madison, Wisc., and founder of Feline-Friendly Consulting. Rodan is featured in a pre-recorded web conference, "AAFP Feline-Friendly Handling Guidelines," on the Partners for Healthy Pets website.

There are 13 percent more cats than dogs in the United States today, but dogs visit the veterinarian more than two times as often as cats, per the Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study, says Rodan. What's more, adult and senior cats are perceived as needing less care than kittens, and indoor cats are perceived as needing less care than others. Such misconceptions have led to an upsurge in dental disease, diabetes, roundworm and other conditions in the U.S. feline population.

Feline resistance is probably the biggest reason for the lower incidence of cat visits, says Rodan. Cats don't like to go to the vet; and their owners don't like to take them. Hence the need for veterinarians and staff to learn proper feline-handling techniques. Proper handling can reduce feline fear, aggression, anxiety and pain; protect and strengthen human-feline-veterinary bond; provide better lifelong feline healthcare (including prevention and early recognition of medical and behavior problems); and increase safety,

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efficiency and job satisfaction for the veterinary team, says Rodan.

The veterinary practice should learn to recognize early signs of fear, such as avoidance, fleeing or fiddling (such as overgrooming a spot). By providing places for the cat to hide and otherwise cope with its fear, the veterinary team can prevent the cat from resorting to its last option – fighting.

Cat owners know their pets don't like change. Yet a trip to the veterinarian has many unfamiliar aspects for the animal: Their owner is chasing them around the house, shoving them into a carrier; they're forced to take a car ride, something with which most are unfamiliar; then, to top it off, they find themselves in an unfamiliar hospital environment, with strange people, smells and handling techniques. It's a recipe for fear, anxiety...and resistance.

The veterinarian's goal is to make the feline patient feel safe and secure. Recognizing signs of fear is a good start. A fearful cat freezes, with ears back, pupils dilated, hair bristled, etc., says Rodan. Direct eye contact can exacerbate the situation.

The team should move slowly and calmly, avoid looming over the cat, avoid approaching the cat from the front, and stay calm. Careful, gentle handling of the cat in the carrier and during the examination is a must. ■