

Ask A Vet: Rabies Vaccination Essential

Sunday, September 25, 2016

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

I dropped my dog off recently for some dental work, and the veterinarian gave a rabies vaccination, even though I did not say that I wanted one. Why did they do that, and why is it that sometimes my dog gets a 1-year vaccine and I've had other pets that have received a 3-year vaccine. What's the difference in vaccines?

-Confused Pet Owner

Dear Confused,

You bring up some very good questions. First, the only vaccination required by federal law is the rabies vaccine. Each state has slightly variable rules regarding rabies vaccination, but I will only discuss the rules for Indiana. In the state of Indiana, all dogs, cats and ferrets over 12 weeks of age must be vaccinated for rabies. Meaning, if a dog, cat, or ferret is presented to a veterinarian without a current rabies vaccine, we are required by state and federal law to vaccinate that animal. The owner is always required to be financially responsible for the rabies vaccine. If you did not authorize that vaccine (whether directly or not), the veterinarian is required by law to ensure that each animal is vaccinated against rabies. There is additionally a penalty for not vaccinating your pet. Indiana Code 35-46-3-1: A person who knowingly or intentionally harbors a dog that is over the age of six (6) months and not immunized against rabies commits harboring a nonimmunized dog, a class C infraction. However, the offense is a class B misdemeanor if the dog causes bodily injury by biting a person. Technically, a veterinarian can report these cases if the owner insists on having a non-vaccinated animal.

Many people bring up the discussion between a 1 year and 3 year rabies vaccine with me. What I explain to each person is that for the most part, that decision is not solely up to the veterinarian. Some of the decision is based on the label of the vaccine. The other part is federal law. Most rabies vaccines state that dogs and cats vaccinated for the first time must be revaccinated within 12 months, then every 36 months afterwards. Ferrets, regardless of the vaccine type, must be vaccinated every 12 months. Federal law is a little more specific for dogs and cats. The first vaccine a pet receives is valid for 12 months. If a pet is re-vaccinated before that vaccine expires, then the next vaccine can be honored for 3 years; and each ensuing vaccine can be honored for 3 years, provided the vaccination has not expired. An expired vaccine (per the law) is going beyond the vaccination date by 1 day. So, technically, your veterinarian has all the support of the law to allow a 1 year vaccine if you have gone past the expiration date by any significant amount of time. This is only a quick piece of rabies law, and as always, discuss vaccination status and any questions with your veterinarian.

-Dr. Jason Heitzman