

RABIES VACCINATION LAW IS CHANGED

THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE CHANGE

By now, most town clerks are well aware that the law regulating rabies vaccinations for dogs and wolf hybrids has changed. This amendment was put in the Executive Fee Bill, H. 772, without any discussion in committee about the implications. Thus, some of the questions being asked about how and when to begin requiring three-year vaccinations were not discussed at any time in the State House. The revised statute reads:

For the purpose of licensing a dog or wolf-hybrid, a current vaccination against rabies means that:

- 1) All dog and wolf-hybrid vaccinations recognized by state and local authorities shall be administered by a licensed veterinarian or under the supervision of a licensed veterinarian.*
- 2) All dogs and wolf-hybrids over three months of age shall be vaccinated against rabies. The initial vaccination shall be valid for 12 months. Within 9 to 12 months of the initial vaccination, the animal must receive a booster vaccination.*
- 3) All subsequent vaccinations following the initial vaccination shall be valid for 36 months. 20 V.S.A. § 3581 (c)*

This section took effect July 1, 2004. Local officials have asked many questions about how long rabies vaccinations are effective and whether a dog would be immunized if it had an old vaccination and was not re-vaccinated exactly at three years. It turns out that much research has been conducted on the question of how long rabies vaccinations might remain effective. The following information was graciously provided by Central Vermont veterinarians Drs. Karen Bradley and Erika Bruner to answer local officials' questions about effectiveness of rabies vaccines.

Vermont was one of only a handful of states that still required rabies booster vaccinations to be given to pets more frequently than every three years. Changing Vermont law to allow rabies booster vaccines to be given every three years, not every two years, will improve our pets' health while still safeguarding the health of the human public.

Vaccine manufacturers have to prove their products are effective using a "challenge study." They vaccinate a group of test animals, wait three years, and then try to directly infect the animals with rabies. If the vaccine passes this test, the U.S. Department of Agriculture approves it as a three-year vaccine. This does not mean that the immunity from the vaccine stops working at the three-year point. Blood tests done on vaccinated animals show that immunity from rabies vaccines lasts much longer – usually about seven years, and sometimes even for life.

Animals who already have immunity from a previous vaccine are not "more immune" after a booster vaccine. In fact, the immunity they already have blocks any new immunity from forming. Giving rabies vaccines to pets more often than every three years does not improve their ability to fight off the disease - they are already as good at that as they can be. However, immunizing them more often than needed can actually be harmful to pets' health. In rare cases, vaccine reactions can even be life-threatening. Autoimmune diseases and specific cancers have also been directly linked to vaccinations. Authorities in the field, including all U.S. veterinary schools, the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA), the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians (NASPHV), strongly recommend that all pets be vaccinated for rabies at three months of age, revaccinated one year later, and then every three years thereafter.

Obviously, the primary concern in our rabies vaccination laws must be the public health of the people of Vermont. We should require that veterinarians use USDA-approved three-year products in conformance with recommended schedules. But we should not risk endangering the health of our pets by giving them vaccines that they do not need, and that serve no purpose to the public good. Veterinarians around the state, as well as our state veterinarian (Dr. Kerry Rood) and state public health veterinarian (Dr. Bob Johnson), agree. Our pets should be boosted for rabies no more than every three years.

- Karen Horn, VLCT Director, Legislative and Membership Services, Karen Bradley, DVM, and Erika Bruner, DVM

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