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Vaccines, Part 3: Is Vaccinating Worth the Risk?

(If you missed the predecessor of this article, you can get it [here](#).)

Vaccines are *not* free of risk; sometimes, their side effects can be outright devastating, crippling, or even fatal.... When considering whether or not to vaccinate, we need to compare a low risk of death with a high risk of misery. That is not easy – and most people unfortunately get so focused on the “worst case” that they create an unnecessary lowering of life quality for their dogs...

Accepting risks

Most people, unfortunately, have a very primitive perception of risk. Risk is often perceived as “the worst possible consequences” – which is both irrational and impossible to live with. The consequence would be that we could not drive cars, for instance, as we do face a risk of getting killed in traffic.

We nevertheless drive! Because we consider our pleasure and enjoyment of life as more important than the risk of losing our lives!

It sounds like a paradox, but it really isn't.

Look at it this way: if we were to abstain everything that possibly could kill us, we could do *nothing* – and would die, because we would be unable to provide for ourselves! We would be completely unable to do anything – because just walking on the streets does have its risks: you can get hit by a car; you can get murdered; you can get hit by lightning; you can have an airplane crash on you; you can get a heart attack; you can be attacked by a vicious dog.

But chances of any of those “worst case scenarios” happening are not very great. We rely on that. It does not mean that we ignore them. But we *choose to neglect* them, under certain circumstances that we consider safe. When those circumstances change, we also reconsider our actions: we might choose to not walk on a field road in a storm, for instance – because we know that the risk of getting hit by lightning under those circumstances is quite large. But on a sunny day, we have no problems with that...

Somehow, we manage to aim at *enjoying life* to the fullest. There is no point in living 100 years in misery. Living 80 years in happiness is a much more attractive alternative to most people, if we have that choice – and understand it.

Comparing risks

For dogs, we have a wonderful option: if life has no chance of being enjoyable, we can free the dog of its suffering. This means that we have the key to make sure that its life is overwhelmingly dominated by joy, not misery.

This also means that we have a moral obligation to make an end to suffering when we have no hope of changing it. This leaves us with some fairly simple math for measuring the life quality we can give our dogs: if day-to-day life is more misery than joy, we make an end. We do not need to complicate matters for ourselves by trying to find out how we compare "10 years of life in partial misery" to "5 years in good health and joy", because the first option is not an ethically acceptable choice, as we have to accept it being for humans...

In order to fully understand what we are dealing with, it is necessary to use statistics. Let us use an illustrative example of two groups of 100 dogs. Group A lives an average of 12 years in happiness. Group B lives an average of 12 years, but with a lot of chronic health problems that cause daily suffering and discomfort, but not so much that we cannot also find many moments of joy.

Which group would you want your dog in?

I will not challenge your ethics, so I will assume the answer is A.

Now, let us modify the situation a bit. Let's say that the happy dogs in group A only live an average of 10 years instead of the 12 years for the dogs in group B. Which group would you now want your dog to be in?

Again, I assume you are not that selfish that you would choose group B...

Let us relate this to the risk of a fatal disease. Let's assume that the reason for dogs in group A to live only 10 years instead of 12 is that this group is exposed to a risk of contracting a fatal disease. As we agreed, we will not allow permanent suffering, so when the dog contracts such a disease, we will euthanize it.

Let's further assume that the likelihood of any dog contracting this disease is about 5% per year. This means that, every year, 5% of the dogs die from this disease, without pain or suffering (at least not for very long), but they nevertheless die.

So, out of our 100 dogs in the group, we will have only 95 left after the first year. After the second year, it would be 95% of 95 = 90.25. Third year would give us 95% of 90.25 = 85.74, and so on. After 12 years, our 100 dogs would have been reduced to 54. We then have 54 live till 12 years, and we have 4-5 dogs live 11 years, 4-5 dogs live 10 years, and so on. Doing the stats on that will give us an average lifespan that comes close to the 10 years.

What does this mean? It means that even as 5% risk every year of contracting a fatal disease is an attractive alternative compared to avoiding that risk altogether, if that avoidance means chronic disease and constant discomfort for the dog.

When the risk gets lower than 5%, the choice becomes even more evident. The good news is that no fatal diseases expose your dog to a risk that high!

This, in turn, also means that our tolerance for suffering and possible chronic discomfort for our dogs should be very low, also when it comes to exercising alternatives to a fatal disease, particularly when the risk for contracting that disease is lower than a few percent per year!

To spell it out: If the risk of contracting the fatal disease is in the range of 1000 ppm (0.1%) or lower, out of our 100 dogs in group A we would still have 99 left after 12 years! That would reduce the average lifespan with only a few months. Would that be a responsible choice compared to a 50% risk of living the last 10 years of a 12-year lifespan with a food allergy and constant itching? Absolutely! Particularly when you consider that the medication you might have to pay for and give the dog during those 10 miserable years could very well shorten the life span with several years!

Unfortunately, most people do the opposite. Out of fear for the rare fatal disease that might reduce the average life expectancy with a few months, they cripple their dogs with drugs and vaccines that easily cut *several years* off the dog's life expectancy and dramatically reduce the quality of the life that is left!

Why do we vaccinate?

Based on the well-known problems coming from vaccinations and the high probability of those problems, the answer to this question should be, "to protect our dogs from potentially *life-threatening* diseases with a *high risk of exposure*". There are several factors that all need to be in place for a disease to be life-threatening:

1. Dogs that contract this disease must have a *significant mortality rate*.
2. There is *no effective cure* or treatment for the disease.
3. The dog has or might get *significant exposure* to the disease and thus has an unacceptably high probability of contracting the disease.

We can argue about what "significant" is - and the comfort level will vary from one person to another, as well as the information that is available will vary. But without making a serious attempt to at least *assess* these risk factors, you will be making some very ill informed choices in regards to vaccination of your dog...

Mogens Eliassen

Mogens Eliassen holds a mag. scient. degree (comparable to a US Ph. D.) in Chemistry from Århus University, Denmark and has 30+ years of experience working with dogs, dog owners, dog trainers, and holistic veterinarians as a coach, lecturer, and education system developer. He is the author of several unique books about dogs and responsible care of dogs, available from www.k9joy.com. He publishes a newsletter "[The Peeing Post](#)" containing lots of tips and advice on dog problems of all kinds, particularly about training, behavioral problems, feeding, and health care.

For more information about Mogens Eliassen, including links to other articles he has published, please send a short e-mail to contact@k9joy.com.