

ENTERTAINMENT



The doggie flu shot dilemma

By [Jessica Firger](#)

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Photo: Getty Images/Dorling Kindersley

It's that time of year — time to decide whether that annual flu shot is really worth it, and it's not just a question for humans.

A vaccine against canine influenza has become increasingly available in recent years, leaving dog owners with yet another safeguard to consider. The first major outbreak of the virus was noted among greyhound racing dogs in 2004, and last year, there were reports of supposed outbreaks in New York, prompting renewed concern.

Some boarding facilities have even started requiring the vaccine for their clients, but city veterinarians and animal-care professionals are divided on whether most dogs really need it.

"Some veterinarians really buy into it," says Dr. Michael Farber, Co-Chief of Staff at West Chelsea Veterinary, noting that the vaccine has had a marketing push. "Others are more cautious about it."

For Bartley Morrisroe, 32, and his girlfriend, Melanie Caduhada, 25, when their vet recommended the flu shot for their 17-month-old French bulldog Marnie, it was a no-brainer. The young pup has already suffered through two bouts of life-threatening pneumonia, requiring her to be hospitalized and put on a respirator, leading to \$8,000 worth of vet bills.

Now, when it comes to contagious diseases, they don't take any chances. "I'd rather go for two shots than take the risk of her getting something serious," explains Morrisroe, a law student, who says the vaccine cost them \$60 in total.

Glen Gaylin, owner of Dog Wash Daycare and Boarding in the West Village, was recently considering requiring the vaccination for all of his clients, but after surveying

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several local vets, he decided not to. "They said the frequency is so small, it's not worth mandating everyone get it," he says. "I think it's Merck drumming up the hysteria."

Farber isn't quite so down on it. "I think it's a good vaccine," he says, "but I don't know if it's my top priority when looking at vaccines." He says he prioritizes rabies, distemper, leptospirosis and kennel cough above the flu vaccine. And, as with kids, dog parents need to be cautious about over-vaccinating. "We don't want to over-burden the immune system with too many vaccines," he says.

Aside from such concerns, the shot is considered quite safe, but its effectiveness isn't certain, Farber notes, given the various possible strains and mutations of the virus.

Meanwhile, Sally Haddock, veterinarian and owner of Saint Marks Veterinary Hospital, says she's treated just one case of canine influenza in the past year and notes that it has a mortality rate of less than 6 percent. "We don't see it that often," she says.

Louise Murray, a veterinarian and vice president at the ASPCA's Bergh Memorial Animal Hospital on the Upper East Side, says over the past seven years she's regularly treated cases of the dog flu, but, like Farber, she stresses that the decision to get your dog inoculated for the flu depends on your lifestyle. "If you have a Chihuahua that you keep in your apartment, and you carry it around in your purse, and it never touches the ground, then it's not necessary," she says.

When might the flu shot be a good idea for your dog? Here, some things to consider:

- * "I'd recommend it for an animal in day care every day," says Farber, putting an emphasis on "every."
- * "If your dog has a weakened immune system and they're prone to getting sick," it can be a good safeguard, Haddock says.
- * Unlike humans, dogs can get the flu anytime of the year, so it's not just a winter worry.
- * Murray suggests that pet owners discuss their dog's lifestyle with their vet to make an informed decision. "I'm a strong believer in personalized medicine," she says.

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