Earlier this week, we received some feedback on one of our articles on leptospirosis, written by Dr Patricia Jordan. This came in from a concerned pet owner, who wrote:

I find statement #1 [the disease is treatable] from 2010 Dogs Naturally magazine alarmingly misleading. Our 1 yr old german shepherd did not have the leptospirosis vaccination and was subsequently exposed to a carrier dog. She was absolutely in top form and condition prior to exposure. She was the picture of health, but she became critically ill after exposure despite intensive antibiotic and IV fluid therapy. She went into acute renal failure and our choices were to extra put her down or try hemodialysis. We opted for dialysis at UC Davis and she did pull through. I will never allow a dog in my care to risk contracting lepto again and we will be getting the lepto vaccine for our dogs. For other pet owners to read your statements seems very misleading having lived through the experience we have.

While Dr Jordan and Dogs Naturally certainly sympathize with this pet owner, her response to her sick dog is one that we are all tempted to make. It’s understandable that we all want to protect our dogs from severe illness but in the case of lepto, vaccination may not be the solution.

Based on serologic data, the main lepto serovars causing disease in dogs include L. pomona, L. grippotyphosa, occasionally L. autumnalis and L.bratislava, and rarely, L. canicola, L. hardjo, and L. icterohaemorrhagiae. What most people don’t know is that the lepto vaccine only protects dogs against the main two servers for about two weeks, if at all. Andre-Fontaine G, Branger C, Gray AW, et al. Comparison of the efficacy of three commercial bacterins in preventing canine leptospirosis. Vet Rec 153:165-169, 2003.
Leptospirosis Vaccine Protection And Dogs: What You Need To Know

Dr Stephen Barr of Cornell University states: “most [vaccines] claim year efficacy except those subunit vaccines covering L. pomona and L. grippotyphosa (protect for 2 to 2½ weeks post-booster)”

This means that your dog has to be vaccinated twice for the lepto vaccine to protect against the primary two serovars and that protection only lasts for about two weeks.

To be truly and fully protected against lepto for a one year period, this would require up to 26 vaccinations. Is this a risk worth taking?

Before you answer that, please read this response from Dr Patricia Jordan:

“If your dog is vaccinated for lepto, the antigens in the vaccines do the same harm to the immune system as possibly a natural infection. There have been cases of dogs having to go through dialysis also to save them and no Leptospira were found. The reason? The damage from the antigens in the vaccinations are just as capable as causing the disease pathology! Vaccinating your dog can also destroy the kidney in 48 hours and in some cases, cause untreatable dermatitis. The damage from lepto vaccination to your dog’s immune system also includes the associated risk of cancer from the adjuvant and the same adjuvant is associated with upregulation of IgE and the consequence includes allergies, asthma, atopy, anaphylaxis and death.”

There are definite risks to the lepto vaccine but the most compelling reason to steer well clear of it is the fact that even if your dog survives this dangerous vaccine without any apparent short term damage, he is only protected for a couple of weeks for the serovars that are most likely to cause harm. We wish we could say that there was an effective solution to protecting your pets from lepto but vaccination certainly isn’t the panacea that many vets claim.