



Feline Immunodeficiency Virus



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Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) is a lentivirus that affects cats worldwide. FIV attacks the immune system, leaving the cat vulnerable to many other infections. The prevalence of infection varies greatly. It is estimated that 1.5% - 4.5% of cats are infected with FIV. FIV is the only non-primate lentivirus to cause an AIDS-like syndrome, but FIV is NOT typically fatal for cats.

Sadly, many people believe that FIV makes cats very sick, that the virus is easily spread and that the cats infected have a lower life expectancy thus many of them are not often adopted. All these beliefs are far from the truth! The fact is: FIV+ cats can live long and healthy lives, just as non-infected cats do.

How is FIV transmitted?

FIV is commonly spread through deep, vicious bite wounds typically inflicted by intact (not neutered) male cats fighting on the street over food, territory or females. FIV is NOT spread through casual contact such as sharing food, water, litter trays, sneezing, mutual grooming or playing. On rare occasions the virus can be transmitted from mother to kittens.

Which cats are more prone to FIV?

Although any feline is susceptible, free-roaming, outdoor intact male cats who fight most frequently contract the disease. Cats who live indoors are the least likely to be infected.

What are the symptoms of FIV?

Cats who are infected with FIV may not show symptoms until years after the initial infection occurred. Although the virus is slow-acting, the cat's immune system is severely weakened once the disease takes hold making the cats susceptible to various secondary infections. Once symptoms developed, they may continually progress OR the cat may show signs of recurrent illness interspersed with periods of relative health.



Some of the most common signs seen in FIV infected cats are:

Fever	Anemia	Lethargy	Poor appetite	Weight loss	Diarrhea	Enlarged lymph nodes
Disheveled coat	Discharge from eyes or nose		Sneezing	Inflammation of the eye (conjunctivitis)		
Inflammation of the gums (gingivitis)		Inflammation of the mouth (stomatitis)		Dental disease		
Hair loss	Chronic skin disease	Wounds that don't heal	Behavior changes			
Frequent urination, straining to urinate or urinating outside of litter box						
Neurological disease (in some cats the virus can affect the brain)						

It is worthwhile to note that other diseases may also develop, such as a neoplasia (lymphoma). Other infectious agents may be more problematic for FIV infected cats such as toxoplasmosis, hemoplasma infections and feline infectious peritonitis.

How is the infection diagnosed?

FIV infection is routinely diagnosed by blood testing. The FIV status of every cat should be known. The most common type of tests looks for the presence of antibodies to the virus in the blood. Since it is possible for an infected cat to transfer FIV antibodies to her kittens, these kittens may test positive from their Mom's antibodies until they have cleared them from their systems, which happens by six months of age. Therefore, kittens who test positive for FIV antibodies when they are younger than six months should undergo antibodies testing again a later date to see if they are infected. Once a cat is determined to be FIV+, that cat is capable of transmitting the disease to other cats.

Treatment and Prognosis

There is no specific antiviral treatment for FIV. Treatment focuses mainly on extending the asymptomatic period, OR if symptoms have developed, on easing the secondary effect of the virus. Based on the specifics of the case, your veterinarian may prescribe some of the following:

- Medication for secondary infections
- Anti-inflammatory drugs
- Immune-enhancing drugs
- Fluid and electrolyte replacement therapy
- Healthy, palatable diet to encourage good nutrition
- Parasite control

Infected cats receiving supportive veterinary care and kept in a stress-free, indoor environment can live comfortable lives for months to years before the disease reaches a chronic stage. Cats with FIV can have great quality of life for a very long time.

Prevention

FIV vaccines are available but may not protect all cats. These vaccines are not considered core vaccines for cats and they can interfere with testing for the virus. It is highly recommended to discuss with your veterinarian all the pros and cons to determine if FIV vaccination is the best option for your cat.

Whether your cat is vaccinated or not, it is of utmost importance to prevent exposure to FIV which can be attained by keeping your cat(s) indoor and avoiding any chance of contact with infected cats. If your cat will be spending time in a cattery, boarding facility or in a home with other felines, make sure all the cats have tested negative for FIV.