

# Feline Immunodeficiency Virus



## How common is the infection?

FIV-infected cats are found worldwide, but the prevalence of infection varies greatly. In the United States, approximately 1.5 to 3 percent of healthy cats are infected with FIV. Rates rise significantly-15 percent or more-in cats that are sick or at high risk of infection. Because biting is the most efficient means of viral transmission, free-roaming, aggressive male cats are the most frequently infected, while cats housed exclusively indoors are much less likely to be infected.

## How is FIV spread?

The primary mode of transmission is through bite wounds. Casual, non-aggressive contact does not appear to be an efficient route of spreading FIV; as a result, cats in households with stable social structures where housemates do not fight are at little risk for acquiring FIV infections. Sexual contact is not a major means of spreading FIV.

## What does FIV do to a cat?

Infected cats may appear normal for years. However, infection eventually leads to a state of immune deficiency that hinders the cat's ability to protect itself against other infections. The same bacteria, viruses, protozoa, and fungi that may be found in the everyday environment--where they usually do not affect healthy animals--can cause severe illness in those with weakened immune systems. These secondary infections are responsible for many of the diseases associated with FIV.

## What are the signs of disease caused by FIV?

An infected cat's health may deteriorate progressively or be characterized by recurrent illness interspersed with periods of relative health. Sometimes not appearing for years after infection, signs of immunodeficiency can appear anywhere throughout the body.

- Poor coat condition and persistent fever with a loss of appetite are commonly seen.
- Inflammation of the gums (gingivitis) and mouth (stomatitis) and chronic or recurrent infections of the skin, urinary bladder, and upper respiratory tract are often present.
- Persistent diarrhea can also be a problem, as can a variety of eye conditions.
- Slow but progressive weight loss is common, followed by severe wasting late in the disease process.
- Various kinds of cancer and blood diseases are much more common in cats infected with FIV, too.
- In unsprayed female cats, abortion of kittens or other reproductive failures have been noted.
- Some infected cats experience seizures, behavior changes, and other neurological disorders.

## How is infection diagnosed?

Antibody tests detect the presence of antibody in the blood of infected cats. Infected mother cats transfer FIV antibodies to nursing kittens, so kittens born to infected mothers may receive positive test results for several months after birth. However, few of these kittens actually are or will become infected. To clarify their infection status, kittens younger than six months of age receiving positive results should be retested at 60-day intervals until they are at least six months old.

A negative test result indicates that antibodies directed against FIV have not been detected, and, in most cases, this implies that the cat is not infected. Nevertheless, it takes eight to 12 weeks after infection (and sometimes even longer) before detectable levels of antibody appear.

### **How can I keep my cat from becoming infected?**

The only sure way to protect cats is to prevent their exposure to the virus. Cat bites are the major way infection is transmitted, so keeping cats indoors-and away from potentially infected cats that might bite them-markedly reduces their likelihood of contracting FIV infection. For the safety of the resident cats, only infection-free cats should be adopted into a household with uninfected cats.

Vaccines to help protect against FIV infection are now available. However, not all vaccinated cats will be protected by the vaccine, so preventing exposure will remain important, even for vaccinated pets. In addition, vaccination may have an impact on future FIV test results. It is important that you discuss the advantages and disadvantages of vaccination with your veterinarian to help you decide whether FIV vaccines should be administered to your cat.

### **I just discovered that one of my cats has FIV, yet I have other cats as well. What do I do now?**

Unfortunately, many FIV-infected cats are not diagnosed until after they have lived for years with other cats. In such cases, all the other cats in the household should be tested, as well. Ideally, all infected cats should be separated from the non-infected ones to eliminate the potential for FIV transmission. If this is not possible-and if fighting or rough play is not taking place-the risk to the non-infected cats appears to be low.

### **How should FIV-infected cats be managed?**

- FIV-infected cats should be confined indoors to prevent spread of FIV infection to other cats in the neighborhood and to reduce their exposure to infectious agents carried by other animals.
- FIV-infected cats should be spayed or neutered.
- They should be fed nutritionally complete and balanced diets. .
- Wellness visits for FIV-infected cats should be scheduled with your veterinarian at least every six months.
- Vigilance and close monitoring of the health and behavior of FIV-infected cats is even more important than it is for uninfected cats. Alert your veterinarian to any changes in your cat's health as soon as possible.

### **How long can I expect my FIV-infected cat to live?**

It is impossible to accurately predict the life expectancy of a cat infected with FIV. With appropriate care and under ideal conditions, many infected cats will remain in apparent good health for many months or years. If your cat has already had one or more severe illnesses as a result of FIV infection, or if persistent fever and weight loss are present, a much shorter survival time can be expected.

*Information taken from a brochure prepared by the American Association of Feline Practitioners and the Cornell Feline Health Center, Cornell University, College of Veterinary Medicine, committed to improving the health of cats by developing methods to prevent or cure feline diseases and by providing continuing education to veterinarians and cat owners.*

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