

# Feline Immunodeficiency Virus



Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) is a lentivirus specific to the cat family that causes a weakening of the cat's immune system. Only cats get FIV; dogs and people do not.

## How do cats get FIV?

The most common mode of transmission is through a deep bite wound from an FIV+ cat to another cat. Casual, non-aggressive contact does not appear to spread FIV; it is very rare for cats to get FIV from just being around infected cats, sharing food bowls, or from a person touching an FIV+ cat and then another cat.

## What are the signs of FIV infection?

There are no specific signs of FIV infection. However, since FIV+ cats have a weaker immune system, they are more prone to getting infections, like upper respiratory infections, ringworm and dental disease. Poor coat condition, weight loss, or fever with a loss of appetite may also be noted at times, as an FIV+ cat's health may be characterized by recurrent illness interspersed with periods of relative health. In general, FIV+ cats tend to live normal lives and have a normal length of life.

## How is infection diagnosed?

Since there are no obvious signs of FIV, the only way to diagnose is to do a blood test, which looks for antibodies (a protein made by the cat in response to FIV infection). A cat can test positive two to four weeks after exposure, but in some cases it can take up to six months.

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. Young kittens receiving positive results should be retested after reaching six months of age.

## Can FIV be treated?

There are no proven treatments for FIV. Most FIV+ cats handle the disease well, but it is important to concentrate on treating secondary illnesses or infections.

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

The only sure way to protect cats is to prevent their exposure to the virus. Because cat bites are the major way infection is transmitted, keep your cats indoors so they do not fight with an FIV+ cat.

There is a vaccine for FIV, but it does not have the best efficacy and, following vaccination, the cat will test positive for the virus and there is no way to differentiate whether the cat tests positive for FIV from the vaccine or from having the infection.

## How should FIV+ cats be managed?

- FIV+ cats should be kept 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+ cats should be spayed or neutered.
- They should be fed nutritionally complete and balanced diets. .

- Wellness visits for FIV+ cats should be scheduled with your veterinarian every six to twelve months.
- Monitoring of the health and behavior of FIV+ 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.

### **Can FIV-negative and FIV+ cats live together?**

FIV-negative and FIV+ cats can live together, as long as the cats get along and do not fight. Spaying or neutering will also reduce any risk.

When introducing a new cat, the risk of an FIV+ cat spreading the virus to an FIV-negative can be minimized by putting the cats in separate rooms until you are confident they will not fight with each other.

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

With appropriate care – staying indoors, feeding a complete and balanced diet, monitoring for infections and dental issues - FIV+ cats can live normal lives, in both quality and length of life.

*Information taken from: 1) Best Friends Animal Society; and 2) 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. ©2002 by Cornell University.*

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