



FIV (Feline Immunodeficiency Virus)

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) is a retrovirus, and belongs to the same family of viruses as FeLV (feline leukemia virus). FIV is considered a lentivirus, as opposed to FeLV, which indicates that it is a slow progressing virus, with a long incubation period. FIV is also in the same family of viruses as HIV, which unfortunately has created an inaccurate perception of the virus. FIV is not a death sentence for cats testing positive for this disease, nor are non-affected cats at risk of transmission simply by cohabiting with affected cats.

What is FIV?

FIV is a lentivirus that affects an estimated 1.5% to 3% of cats in the United States. FIV is species-specific and affects domestic cats. There is no risk of transmission of FIV to other species, including humans. FIV has been present for many years but was first identified in 1986.

FIV weakens the immune system by depleting the number of white blood cells, causing an infected cat to be more susceptible to infection and disease than a healthy cat. FIV is a fatal disease, but many infected cats live a normal life span, and live for years following infection without any health problems resulting from the virus.

A vaccine was developed in 2002, but there are a number of concerns regarding its use.

- The major concern is that once a cat is vaccinated for FIV, it will test positive for FIV. At this time, there is not a test available that is able to distinguish between a cat infected with FIV and a cat vaccinated for FIV.
- The vaccine does not provide full protection from all strains of FIV. There are five strains of FIV and the current vaccine was developed using only two of the five strains.
- There is a risk of development of post-vaccination sarcomas with this type of vaccine.

How is FIV transmitted?

FIV is not easily spread from one cat to another. It is an extraordinarily fragile virus, and cannot survive outside of the body for very long. The virus is present in the blood and saliva of an infected cat, so it is most often transmitted through deep, penetrating bite wounds. Even so, enough of the virus must be present in the saliva of the infected cat to cause infection, making it possible that an exposure to FIV may not cause infection. In rarer instances, FIV may be passed from an infected mother to her newborns.

Who is most at risk of contracting FIV?

Unneutered (male), adult, outdoor cats are the most likely to be infected, providing yet another reason why it is imperative to spay and neuter. This group of cats are the most likely to fight, typically for food, and end up being at the greatest risk of infection. The average age of diagnosis of FIV is 5 years.

How do I prevent my cat from contracting FIV?

Spay and neuter your cats. If there are stray or feral cats in your area, make a commitment to work toward having those cats spayed/neutered as well. There are a number of low-cost spay/neuter outlets available, as well as resources to assist with TNR (trap-neuter-return) of feral cats. Reducing the likelihood that cats will fight and limiting the population of outdoor cats through spay/neuter, will make the biggest impact in the presence of FIV.

Keep your cats inside. Many cats are quite content as indoor-only cats. If your cat enjoys outside time, and many do, ensure that your cat's outdoor time is safe. Supervise your cat while he or she is exploring, or create an outside enclosure, or 'cat run', for your cat to enjoy. Do not allow your cat to free-roam, or come and go as they please. This is the number one health risk to all cats.

What type of care does an FIV positive cat require?

Many FIV positive cats will live a normal life span, even outliving non-infected cats. This is not always the case, and many do succumb to the disease prematurely. Infected cats often do not show any outward symptoms, but any health concern in an infected cat should be addressed and treated immediately, to prevent further degradation of the immune system. It is imperative that infected cats NOT be vaccinated for FIV.

Long-term nutritional support is the best way to maintain the health of an infected cat. Feeding a high quality diet, in conjunction with nutritional supplements, is a must.

- Buffered Vitamin C (ester-C) – Vitamin C (the buffered form will not irritate the stomach) boosts the immune system, as well as kills bacteria and can retard the progression of the disease.
- Bone meal – FIV leaches calcium from the bones of infected cats. Bone meal helps to recover bone mass and regenerate the immune system.
- Acidophilus – FIV destroys the normal, healthy bacteria present in the colon, which makes an infected cat more vulnerable to upper respiratory infections and other health concerns. Acidophilus helps to restore the natural flora typically present in the colon.

Can FIV positive and FIV negative cats live together?

Yes! Infected and non-infected cats can live together, provided that all cats are spayed and neutered. Recent research, conducted at Glasgow University, indicates that the chances that FIV will be passed from one cat to another is less than 2%. At our sanctuary, our FIV positive permanent residents are housed with our FIV negative permanent residents, and we have *never* had a case of transmission.

FIV positive cats are wonderful, vibrant creatures in need of homes, just as much as their FIV negative friends. If you are considering a new addition to your family, please consider exploring the possibility of adopting an FIV positive cat. **The most startling statistic, that we hope to change, is that more FIV positive cats are euthanized because people are unwilling to consider them for adoption than due to any health-related effects of the virus.** Please help us spread the word about the realities of FIV, and consider adopting an FIV positive friend!

Additional FIV resources

<http://www.catchat.org/fiv.html>

<http://www.caringforcreatures.com/index.php?p=fiv>

http://cats.about.com/cs/vaccination/a/fiv_vaccine.htm

<http://www.vet.cornell.edu/fhc/brochures/fiv.html>

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We who reach to help another creature, hold the heart of humanity in our hands.