

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV)



Cats who are infected with feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) may not show symptoms until years after the initial infection occurred. Although the virus is slow-acting, a cat's immune system is severely weakened once the disease takes hold. This makes the cat susceptible to various secondary infections. Infected cats who receive supportive medical care and are kept in a stress-free, indoor environment can live relatively comfortable lives for months to years before the disease reaches its chronic stages.

Many people confuse FIV with feline leukemia virus (FeLV). Although these diseases are in the same retrovirus family and cause many similar secondary conditions FeLV and FIV are different diseases.

What Are the Symptoms of FIV?

An FIV-infected cat may not show any symptoms for years. Once symptoms do develop, however, they may continually progress –or a cat may show signs of sickness interspersed with health for years. If your cat is demonstrating any of the following symptoms, please have examined by your veterinarian:

- Enlarged lymph nodes
- Fever
- Anemia
- Weight loss
- Disheveled coat
- Poor appetite
- Diarrhea
- Abnormal appearance or inflammation of the eye (conjunctivitis)
- Inflammation of the gums (gingivitis)

- Inflammation of the mouth (stomatitis)
- Dental disease
- Skin redness or hair loss
- Wounds that don't heal
- Sneezing
- Discharge from eyes or nose
- Frequent urination, straining to urinate or urinating outside of litter box
- Behavior change

How Is FIV Transmitted?

FIV is mainly passed from cat to cat through deep bite wounds, the kind that usually occur outdoors during aggressive fights and territorial disputes—the perfect reason to keep your cat inside.

Another, less common mode of transmission is from an FIV-infected mother cat to her kitten. FIV does not seem to be commonly spread through sharing food bowls and litter boxes, social grooming, sneezing and other casual modes of contact.

Which Cats Are Most 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.

Can a Person Catch FIV from a Cat?

No. FIV cannot be transmitted from cat to human, only from cat to cat.

What Should I Do If I Think My Cat Has FIV?

If you suspect your cat has FIV, have him examined and tested by your veterinarian right away. During your visit, be ready to describe any symptoms that you have detected, no matter how minute they seem. Also make sure to keep your cat indoors, away from other felines who might possibly be infected or whom he could infect, until you have a diagnosis.

How Is FIV Diagnosed?

FIV infection is routinely diagnosed by blood testing. The FIV status of every cat should be known. The most common type of test looks for the presence of antibodies to the virus in the blood. No test is 100-percent accurate all of the time, and your veterinarian will interpret the test result and determine whether further testing is needed to confirm either a positive or negative test result. Once a cat is determined to be FIV-positive, that cat is capable of transmitting the disease to other cats.

Since it is possible for an infected mother cat to transfer FIV antibodies to her kittens, these kittens may test positive from their mother'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're younger than six months should undergo antibody tests again at a later date to see if they are infected.

How Is FIV Treated?

Unfortunately, there is no specific antiviral treatment for FIV. Cats can carry the virus for a long time before symptoms appear. Therefore, treatment focuses mainly on extending the asymptomatic period or, if symptoms have set in, on easing the secondary effects of the virus. Your veterinarian may prescribe some of the following treatments:

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

How Do I Care for My FIV-Infected Cat?

- Keep your cat indoors. This will protect him from contact with disease-causing agents to which he may be susceptible. By bringing your cat indoors, you're also protecting the uninfected cats in your community.
- Watch for changes—even seemingly minor—in your cat's health and behavior. Immediately report any health concerns to your vet.
- Bring your cat to your vet at least twice per year for a wellness checkup, blood count and urine analysis.
- Feed your cat a nutritionally balanced food—no raw food diets, please, as bacteria and parasites in uncooked meat and eggs can be dangerous to immunocompromised pets.
- Be sure your cat is spayed or neutered.

How Can FIV Be Prevented?

The best way to prevent your cat from contracting the virus is to keep him indoors, avoiding any chance of contact with infected felines. If you walk your cat, keep him on a leash when outdoors. And if your cat is going to be spending any time in a cattery or in a home with other felines, make sure all cats have tested negative for FIV.

Also, any recently adopted cat should be tested for FIV prior to entering your home. You may also want to speak to your veterinarian about the FIV vaccine and if it is appropriate for your cat.

What Can Happen If FIV Goes Untreated?

Without proper treatment, the secondary infections that can occur as a consequence of FIV can progress to life-threatening conditions. Additionally, cats with FIV can develop various forms of cancer, blood diseases or kidney failure, which will ultimately claim the cat's life.