



FELINE IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS (FIV):

What You Need to Know

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) is one of the most common infectious diseases in cats globally. In infected cats, FIV attacks the body's immune / self-defense system, leaving infected kitties susceptible to many other infections.

*** How Do Cats Get FIV:** Feline Immunodeficiency Virus is spread directly from one cat to another cat primarily through **bite wounds**. While it is not common for a mama cat to spread the disease to her kittens while nursing, it is possible for kittens to get FIV while the female is pregnant. It is highly unlikely for the virus to spread through shared food and water bowls or from litter boxes.

*** Which Cats Are Most At Risk of Getting this Deadly Disease:** Since the virus is spread directly from one cat to another through bite wounds, those cats that go outdoors and get into fights with other cats are at the highest risk of exposure to the virus. **As you might expect, male cats that have not been neutered and have access to the outdoors are more likely to get the disease.**

*** What Are the Signs or Symptoms of a Cat with FIV:** There are 3 different phases of infection with FIV:

1) Acute phase: Usually occurs 1 to 3 months after exposure to the virus. Fever, lack of appetite and those cats that are simply ADR (Ain't Doin' Right) are often seen. But for many infected cats, this phase may be very mild, so the cat parent may not notice any significant changes in their pet at all.

2) Asymptomatic phase: This phase may last for months to years as the virus grows very slowly in the immune / defense cells. Therefore many cats may not show any signs of illness at all. And some cats will remain in this stage for life and never become worse over time.

3) Progressive phase: In this stage of infection, the weakening of the body's immune system becomes more advanced, allowing more bacterial and viral infections to develop. Cats may develop on-going or recurring infections of the skin, eyes, urinary tract and respiratory tract. Severe dental disease and gum disease may be seen, which leads to weight loss since inflamed gums and teeth make it painful to eat. Once these conditions progress, the survival time of infected cats is only a few months.

*** How Can I Find Out if My Cat Has FIV:** While we have very reliable tests to see if a cat has FIV or not, there are a couple of important considerations (see next paragraph). A small blood sample provides us with results in 10-12 minutes. We use the term "Positive" for FIV if a cat has the disease. If they do not have the disease, they are "Negative". Obviously, we always hope for "Negative". When we test your kitty for FIV, we are also testing for Feline Leukemia.

However, there is a special situation that you need to be aware of. Our FIV test is an Antibody test. If a cat is exposed to FIV from a bite wound, it may take anywhere from 2 months to 6 months for the body to develop enough antibodies against FIV to be detected with the blood test. Therefore, if a cat had been in a recent fight and was tested for FIV and Feline Leukemia when treated by a veterinarian for an abscess or puncture wounds, it is very unlikely that the test will give an accurate result for the FIV. Ideally, that kitty should be tested at least 2 months (and ideally a little longer) after the fight / possible exposure to FIV to get a more accurate answer.

* **How Do Vets Treat a Cat With FIV:** Unfortunately, **we do not have a cure for a cat with FIV.** Our main focus of attention with FIV Positive cats is to prevent other viral or bacterial infections within the body.

* **How Long Do FIV Infected Cats Live:** While a cat with FIV can live a normal life for many years, once we begin to see signs and symptoms from other infections, the typical life expectancy diminishes depending on the severity of the other causes of illness.

* **Is There an Effective Vaccine to Protect My Cat from FIV:** No.

* **If I Have an Infected Cat that is NOT Showing any Signs of Illness, Can She/He still be Contagious to Other Cats:** Unfortunately, YES. We do see a very small number of cats that may never show signs of disease, yet test Positive, and these cats are every bit as much contagious as a cat that is not showing symptoms.

* **What about my Dog ? Is She / He at Risk:** Good news for dogs ! The disease is only a concern for Cats.

* **What about people ? Is FIV related to HIV:** No. The viruses that cause FIV in cats and HIV in people are not the same. While there are similarities in the way the viruses affect cats and people, there is no evidence that FIV can infect people or cause diseases in humans. Likewise, there is no evidence that people with HIV pose a risk to our pets.

* **What if I Find a Stray Cat That Tests “Positive” for FIV, and I Cannot Keep it Indoors or Away from Other Cats:** This is a very challenging decision that only you, the pet parent, can make. I feel that if you have a cat that tests Positive for FIV (meaning that they do have the disease), you have an obligation and a responsibility to protect all other cats from this infected and contagious cat. Putting the cat back outdoors knowing it could continue to infect other cats with this deadly virus is, in my opinion, reckless, irresponsible and unethical. But you do have some options:

1) Try to re-home the cat with someone who does not have another cat. But of course be sure to advise the new potential pet parent that this kitty has FIV and can be contagious to other cats, especially if there is a risk of fighting and bite wounds.

2) There are individuals who take in only cats with FIV, so they are among other cats with FIV. Check with area Veterinarians or Humane Societies to see if they know of anyone who can assist.

3) Unfortunately, if you don't have any other options, then euthanizing the cat with FIV is much preferred to letting the cat expose countless other cats unnecessarily

* **What If I Find a Stray Cat / Kitten That Tests ‘Positive”, but Is Not Showing Any Symptoms of Disease and We Decide We Want to Keep The Kitty:** As mentioned earlier, there are cats that test Positive, but are not showing signs or symptoms of the disease. And there are lots of cats that test Positive, and never develop symptoms. Preventing the spread of FIV to other cats is the most important concern. Otherwise, minimize stress in the household (often caused by the presence of other pets) ... check the mouth and gums frequently for infection ... and be sure to treat infections early in the course of the illness. These are our best means of keeping an FIV cat alive for years to come.

- Dr Bob Parrish

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