

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV)

As the name suggests this condition is similar to HIV in humans, and principally once infected it compromises the immune system of the affected cat. The condition was first diagnosed in a colony of rescue cats in America that showed similar symptoms to human HIV sufferers. However, it is believed that it has been prevalent worldwide in all cat populations (including wild and zoo) for longer than this.

How does FIV cause disease?

FIV is a virus and once it infects an individual cat its aim is to replicate itself. To do this it uses some of the cells of the immune system, but in the process kills or damages them. Ultimately this leads to a decline in the cat's immune system. It is this affect that causes the problem, as affected cats are left more susceptible to contracting infections and other disease.

Can people catch FIV?

This is a very important question and, although the viruses for HIV and FIV are related and affect humans and cats in a similar way, the answer is **no**. The two viruses are species specific, ie: FIV only affects cats and HIV only affects humans.

How does a cat get infected?

The most common mode of transmission is by biting during a fight as saliva contains a large quantity of virus. It is also possible for an infected cat to pass the disease via licking/grooming another individual or sharing a food bowl, although it is not as readily passed this way and the cats would have to live in close association.

Kittens from infected mothers can rarely contract the disease in the uterus or possibly by suckling the milk or being groomed by the affected mother. However, disease is not always contracted and kittens can often be negative for FIV even if the mother is positive. Sexual transmission is not thought to be significant in the spread of FIV.

The virus is not able to survive well outside the body. Therefore passing it on via clothes or on food bowls that have been used historically does not occur. Whether it can be passed by blood sucking organisms such as fleas/ticks is still unknown, so regular parasite treatment is advised.

Which cats are most at risk?

The animals at most risk are the free roaming, entire male cats. This is due to their lifestyle and territorial nature, thus they meet a lot of cats and fight. Pedigree cats are under represented, but this will be due to the fact that entire males are often part of a breeding colony and are housed to prevent disease being brought in.

What signs will an infected cat show?

The infection may be contracted early in life, but then it may take several years for the cat to show symptoms of disease. Therefore, many cases are diagnosed in middle aged to older cats.

The first phase of infection may lead to the cat showing short-term signs of lethargy, having a temperature and lymph nodes being raised. These often resolve and the cat is once again well in itself. The cat may then remain well for a long period before it starts showing other symptoms. Symptoms are actually a cause of other diseases that take hold because of the compromised immune system. Therefore they can include almost any sign. For example, common symptoms may include mouth infections, conjunctivitis and other eye infections, respiratory infections, anaemia and many others.

What is the outlook for a cat with FIV?

The outlook must always be guarded, but is not necessarily too bleak. If the cat has only just developed clinical signs, or is healthy, it will usually be a considerable period (one to three years or longer) before the cat becomes very ill. The response to treatment of secondary infections is usually good initially, allowing the cat a good quality of life. With time the clinical signs become harder to treat. Other chronic/recurrent problems tend to develop. All these factors contribute to a gradual, or occasionally sudden, deterioration. When the cat no longer has a good quality of life, and treatment becomes ineffective, then it should be put to sleep.

What should happen if a cat is FIV positive?

If a cat is diagnosed positive then there are many considerations to be made. There is no need to put them to sleep if they are well and they can remain well for a considerable time after diagnosis. It will be important to provide them with good health care including regular vaccination and parasite control (flea, tick and worm) to prevent disease in the immune compromised animal. Any symptoms noted should receive prompt treatment, as their immune systems will often not be able to cope.

There are several other factors to consider, especially that the cat is a potential source of infection to other animals. Ideally, infected cats should be confined indoors to prevent spread. Obviously, if the infected cat is a territorial entire male this will be difficult. However, castration may help this and confining should always be a priority in these cats as they pose a greater risk to the wider population.

Is there any treatment?

The main form of treatment will be to resolve any infections that the cat may catch as a result of having FIV. For example, if there is bacterial infection antibiotics should be started promptly to halt its progress. It is common for longer courses to be necessary in these cats as the immune system is not able to help as well.

There have been developments in the production of antiviral drugs for the use in such cases (as is the treatment for humans with HIV). Although initial results may appear promising there are no current scientific studies to assess their effectiveness.

How is FIV diagnosed?

FIV is diagnosed by blood sampling the cat. The main test used in veterinary practices detects antibodies in the bloodstream to FIV. These antibodies are not protective for the disease unfortunately, but prove the virus is present. As with all testing it is possible to get false results, albeit very rarely. Therefore, if you get a positive result then this can be confirmed with a second sample.

Alternatively, if you get a negative result but feel that it is still a possibility then a second sample can be a good idea. This can be sent away to specialist laboratories for a different (virus isolation) test. These again are not 100%, but the same result on both tests should confirm either way.

Is there a vaccine available?

There is no vaccine in the UK. However, there is a vaccine developed in the USA, although there is only very limited data on its efficacy. The vaccine does stimulate antibody production and thus would render the antibody diagnostic test invalid. It will be essential to evaluate this further before there can be any commercial use.



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Quick Reference Guide

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