

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) Infection

Has my cat got feline AIDS?

Being FIV positive is not the same as having feline AIDS. AIDS describes the terminal stages of disease which may not occur for many years or at all! FIV positive means that your cat has been infected by the virus.

Are my family at risk?

NO, though HIV in man belongs to a similar group there is no risk of cross infection.

Are other cats in the household likely to be infected?

Other cats in your household may already be infected. Generally, however, spread between cats through social contact is extremely unlikely so the majority of your cats may well be FIV negative.

Are other cats in the household at risk?

Risks to other cats in the household is low unless the cat that is infected is a fighter. The virus does not survive long in the environment so disinfection is not of great value. It is advisable that the positive cat is fed from a separate food bowl as saliva can have large amounts of virus in it.

How do cats get FIV?

It is thought FIV is transmitted primarily by biting, cats which are known fighters particularly those with a history of cat bite abscesses have a higher risk of being FIV positive. Kittens can also be infected at birth probably through virus that is present in the queen's milk. Around a quarter to a third of kittens born to an infected queen are likely to be infected themselves. Normal social interactions such as grooming, have a very low risk of transmitting FIV.

How is FIV diagnosed?

FIV is diagnosed on a blood test by looking for an immune response (antibodies) to the virus. If this test is positive, it is likely that your cat is infected by the virus. False positive and negative results do occur for a variety of reasons e.g., antibodies to the virus present in the bloodstream of an infected queen will pass via the milk into her kittens giving a positive test result in the kittens which may not be infected. Kittens under 4 months of age that test positive should therefore be retested when they are six months old.

Will my cat recover?

As far as we know, once a cat is infected with the virus it will remain infected for the rest of its life, though **it is not clear if all infected cats will become ill.**

What type of disease does FIV cause?

FIV causes disease because it alters the cat's immune system so it becomes less able to respond to other infections in the normal way. This means that cats with many types of disease can be FIV positive, such cats are characterised by chronic or recurrent infections that fail to respond to treatment in the normal way. Common clinical signs of FIV infection that have been reported overseas include:

1. Gingivitis /stomatitis (inflammation of the gums / mouth)
2. Weight loss
3. Poor appetite
4. Fever
5. Inflammation of the membrane around the eyes (conjunctivitis)
6. Swollen lymph glands
7. Vomiting and diarrhoea

A lot of these signs are very non-specific and many diseases can have a similar clinical picture. It is unclear whether cats in our country that are FIV positive get these disease syndromes, but there is good information that they have a shorter life expectancy than FIV negative cats.

Is there any treatment?

Secondary infections can be effectively treated with antibiotics etc. but no specific treatment for the virus is available. Some cats have been treated with human anti-HIV drugs such as AZT with limited success.

Should I have my cat euthanised?

Certainly not on the basis of being FIV positive! Like HIV, cats with FIV have a long period where they appear healthy and show no clinical signs. This period can last for very many years during which your cat can have a normal, happy life.

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How can I help my cat?

You can help your cat by ensuring it has a healthy life style and good quality food together with regular worming and yearly booster vaccinations. Any infections should be treated promptly and aggressively. The healthier a cat is the longer the asymptomatic period tends to be. Keeping your cat indoors is also a good idea as it reduces the likelihood of your cat picking up infections from other cats as well as reducing the spreading of the virus from your cat to other cats.

How do you stop cats becoming infected?

As most cats become infected from bite wounds during fighting, the risk of infection can be minimised by making sure your cat is neutered and, where possible, kept in at night as this is the most common time for cat fights.

One cat in my household is FIV positive and the others are not, what should I do?

There are two options:

1. Re-home the FIV positive cat to a house with no other cats.
2. As the risk of infection spreading to your other cats by social contact is low, many people choose to keep the FIV positive cat, and vaccinate other cats in house.

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