

All About Pets

The national pet care information service



FIV AND FELV



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

FELINE IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS (FIV)

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) is related to the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) responsible for causing AIDS in people.

There is no cure. The virus causes the destruction of the white blood cells needed to protect the body against infectious diseases. FIV is specific to cats and there is no risk of people catching FIV or AIDS from cats.

How does the virus spread?

Around six in every 100 cats carry the virus. FIV is found in a cat's bodily fluids and passes from cat to cat through bites. The virus can also pass from a mother to her kittens. There is no evidence that FIV is sexually transmitted.



Do infected cats have to be put to sleep?

If they are healthy at the time of diagnosis, no. FIV will probably shorten a cat's life, but many infected cats can enjoy long periods of good health. However, if your pet is suffering from prolonged illnesses it may be kinder to opt for euthanasia.

What are the symptoms of infection?

In the first few days after it is infected your cat may show signs of ill health, such as a fever. However, these signs soon appear to get better and your cat may then be healthy for months or years. Eventually it will become more susceptible to infection. Recurrent illnesses such as inflammation of the mouth or eyes, skin infections, anaemia or diarrhoea are suspicious for FIV.

How do I know if my cat is incubating the disease?

Infection can only be confirmed with a blood test to look for antibodies. Other tests for the disease are also available, but none is absolutely accurate.

What can be done to help my cat if it is infected?

Infected cats are more at risk of developing severe disease from a simple infection that wouldn't trouble a healthy cat. Treatment is aimed at controlling these infections.

What about my other cats?

Cats infected with FIV should be kept indoors. The risk of transmission by social contact is low, but infected cats should be fed separately and it may be best to isolate them from uninfected cats. Litter trays should be disinfected after use. Female cats with the virus should be spayed.

FELINE LEUKAEMIA VIRUS

(FeLV)

Feline Leukaemia virus (FeLV) is probably the most important virus in cats. Infection is almost always fatal. The effects of the virus on the immune system are similar to those that occur in humans with AIDS, but FeLV only affects cats. It cannot affect humans or other animals.

How is the disease passed on?

The Feline Leukaemia virus is present in the bodily fluids of affected cats. It can be spread by licking, sneezing, sharing food bowls or by cat bites, or less commonly, during sexual relations and between a mother cat and its kittens. Not all cats that come into contact with the virus get the infection.



Will my cat catch FeLV?

About one in every 100 cats has a persistent infection and is potentially infectious to other cats. Young animals (under six months of age) are the most susceptible to the virus, and one in three of these will go on to develop disease.

What does FeLV do?

The virus causes destruction of the white blood cells that are one of the main bodily defences against disease, leaving the cat vulnerable to infection. It can also cause anaemia and cancers. In other cats a variety of long term or recurrent diseases may occur including lethargy, weight loss, poor appetite and abortion. Infected cats may appear healthy at first but about eight out of ten dies within three years of being infected.

My cat has been diagnosed with FeLV – will it have to be put to sleep?

Infection with FeLV cannot be cured so it may be kinder to euthanase a cat that is suffering. In some cases medical treatments can help to control infections or cancers which occur as a result of FeLV. If your pet is healthy at the time of diagnosis, there is no reason for euthanasia, although you should keep your pet away from other cats.

How do you know if a cat has got FeLV?

FeLV must be suspected if your cat gets one illness after another. It can only be diagnosed by a blood test.

Can FeLV be treated?

There is no way to stop an infection once it has become established. Vaccination can help prevent infection of an unexposed cat, although no vaccine is guaranteed to work every time. Two vaccinations (a few weeks apart) should be given to kittens starting at eight to ten weeks old and annual booster vaccinations are needed. FeLV vaccination is not always included in the routine vaccinations – check with your vet.

Are FeLV vaccinations dangerous?

The vaccines for FeLV are safe though a lump may form at the site, which normally disappears over a few weeks. If your cat is the only one in your household and spends all of its time indoors, there is no risk of contact and vaccination is probably unnecessary. If you have several indoor cats and are considering getting another it may be worth testing them all for FeLV – talk to your vet.



My cat has tested positive for FeLV – what do I do?

If two consecutive tests twelve weeks apart detect FeLV it is safe to say that infection is permanent. Keep an infected cat away from other cats even if they have been vaccinated and don't allow it outside. Sadly, in some situations you may have to think about having the infected cat put to sleep (euthanased).

When is it safe to get a new kitten?

The virus does not live long outside the body but to be safe all feeding bowls, litter trays and so on should be washed with hot soapy water and surfaces rinsed with a weak solution of bleach.

Further information

For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk, the national pet care information service. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is provided by The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity. We rely entirely on your support to enable us to continue our vital work. Any contribution would be most welcome. Thank you.

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