

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV)

FIV stands for "feline immunodeficiency virus," just as HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. In fact, these two viruses are closely related and much of the general information that has become common knowledge for HIV also holds true for FIV. FIV is a virus that causes AIDS in cats; however, there is a long asymptomatic period before AIDS occurs and our job is to prolong this asymptomatic period. The average life expectancy from the time of diagnosis for FIV is 5 years. Humans cannot be infected with FIV; FIV is a cats-only infection.

How Is FIV Diagnosed?

Most of the time, infection from FIV is discovered using a screening test performed in your veterinarian's office or from a blood panel run at your veterinarian's reference laboratory. Once a cat has been identified as positive by a screening test, a follow-up confirmation test called a "Western Blot" is the next step. Once this test is positive, the cat is considered to be truly infected.

A new kitten receives a screening test around age 3-6 months. Cats are often re-tested when they are ill, but since most of our feline patients live their entire lives indoors, the FIV virus is not of much concern.

For outdoor cats, it is a whole other story. The FIV virus is spread by bite wounds between cats. Adult cats, rather than kittens, are at risk. The American Association of Feline Practitioners recommends that outdoor cats be tested annually for this virus and for the Feline Leukemia Virus (the "FeLV" virus).

FIV can live in its host's body for years before leading to a life-threatening AIDS situation. Ultimately, FIV suppresses the immune system and the average life expectancy from the time of diagnosis is 5 years.

In August 2002, Fort Dodge Animal Health released a vaccine for FIV. Our hospital has looked long and hard at this vaccine which, on the surface, seems like a good idea for outdoor cats or cats living with FIV-positive housemate cats. We have chosen not to utilize this vaccine at least until more information is available. Below is a list of the features of the product that leave us with reservations.

- There are five strains of FIV virus, called "Clades." The vaccine was made using Clades A and D and tested using Clade A. Clade B, for example, is a very common strain in most regions of the United States and no testing of the vaccine has been performed thus far against Clade B. This means that a pet owner might wrongly believe they were protecting their cat fully against the FIV virus with this vaccine.
- The FIV vaccine is "adjuvanted." An adjuvant is an additive used with killed vaccines to improve their ability to stimulate the immune system. Unfortunately, adjuvanted vaccines have been implicated in the development of certain tumors in the cat. Our hospital currently does not use adjuvanted vaccines for cats, and has no desire to administer a vaccine that stimulates tumor growth even under rare circumstances.
- Vaccinated cats will test positive on all current methods of testing for the FIV virus. This means it will no longer be possible to distinguish vaccinated cats from truly infected cats. The vaccine is advertised at protecting 82% of cats, which means 18% can still be infected. This is nearly a one in five chance of unknowingly having an infected cat.
- FIV infection is preventable by keeping cats indoors and preventing cat fights.

How Did My Cat Get Infected?

The major route of virus transmission is by the deep bite wounds that occur during fighting. There are other means of spreading the virus but they are less common. Mother cats can not readily infect their kittens (except in the initial stages of infection). FIV can be transmitted sexually and via improperly screened blood transfusions. Casual contact such as sharing food bowls or snuggling is very unlikely to be associated with transmission.

Isolation of an FIV+ cat is not necessary in a stable household unless the FIV+ cat is likely to fight with the other residents.

What Do I Do Now?

Some lifestyle changes will probably be needed now that you know you have an FIV+ cat.

- **Keep Your Cat Indoors Only**

Now that you know your cat has an infectious disease, the responsible thing is to prevent the spread of this disease in your community. This means that your cat will need to begin life as an indoor cat. Cats who are used to living outdoors will make a fuss about not being allowed outside. It is crucial that you do not give in as this will simply reinforce the crying and fussing.

- **No Raw Foods**

There are currently numerous fad diets involving raw foods for pets. Uncooked foods, meats especially, can include parasites and pathogens that a cat with a normal immune system might be able to handle but an FIV+ cat might not. Stick to the major reputable cat food brands.

- **Vaccination**

Vaccination should be continued for these cats just as they are for other cats. We still recommend modified live virus vaccines for FIV+ cats just as we do for FIV- cats.

- **Parasite Control**

The last thing an FIV+ cat needs is fleas, worms, or mites, especially now that he is going to be an indoor cat. Consult with your veterinarian about which parasites you should be especially concerned with and which product is right for you.

- **Immune-Stimulating Agents**

There are numerous products on the market claiming to stimulate the immune system of the FIV+ cat. These include Acemannan, Immunoregulin®, and Interferon Alpha. None of these products have been shown definitively to be helpful though it appears that they certainly do not do any harm. Our hospital recommends Interferon Alpha for asymptomatic cats as it is relatively inexpensive and our impression is that it helps. Interferon alpha is used in an extremely dilute form and is used as a salty liquid added to the cat's food or administered orally on a daily basis.

- **General Monitoring**

While a non-geriatric FIV- cat should have an annual examination, the FIV+ cat should have a check-up twice a year. Annually, a full blood panel and urinalysis is prudent. Also, it is important to be vigilant of any changes in the FIV+ cat. Small changes that one might not think would be significant in an FIV- cat, should probably be thoroughly explored in an FIV+ cat.

THE FELINE IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS IS NOT TRANSMISSIBLE TO HUMANS IN ANY WAY.

The Immune-Suppressed Owner

Immune-suppressed cats and immune-suppressed owners do not mix well. Those who are immune suppressed, be they human or non-human, are inclined to become infected with opportunistic organisms, and in turn shed larger numbers of those organisms than one might naturally come into contact with in the environment. This means that someone who is immune-suppressed (human or not) can serve as an amplifier for infectious agents. An immune-suppressed cat can increase an immune-suppressed human's exposure to infectious agents and vice versa. This is obviously not a good situation. The same is true for multiple immune-suppressed cats living together. If possible, there should be only one immune-suppressed individual per home.