

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV)

By Virginia Clemans, DVM

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) is very similar to the virus that causes AIDS in humans. Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and FIV belong to the same class, the lentiviruses. However, the virus seen in cats is in no way transmissible to humans or dogs. FIV occurs worldwide, but is more prevalent in certain geographic areas.



FIV is shed in the saliva of infected cats, so the disease is spread through bite wounds. The disease is seen more often in un-neutered stray or feral male cats, since fighting is more common among these cats. Transmission can also occur from an infected mother to her kittens, either while in the womb or through ingestion of milk during nursing.

A simple blood test called ELISA is the first step in diagnosing FIV, and this test can be done in most veterinary clinics or hospitals. However, for a variety of reasons, cats can have false positives for FIV on the ELISA test, so adult cats who test positive should be retested immediately with the Western Blot (a laboratory test). Both the ELISA and Western Blot detect the presence of antibodies to the virus.

Young kittens born to a FIV-positive mother will inherit the antibodies, but not usually the virus. So, if a kitten tests positive for FIV using the ELISA, it is necessary to wait three to six months before doing the Western Blot, to give time for the inherited antibodies to dissipate before retesting.

Cats who test positive for FIV can show many different symptoms. They are more susceptible to a variety of infections of the skin, respiratory tract, urinary tract, eyes, ears and mouth. Sometimes these infections can be difficult to treat and can reoccur despite treatment. FIV-positive cats can also become anemic and can potentially develop certain types of cancer.

Although there is no specific treatment for FIV, infected cats can live long and healthy lives. It is important to keep these cats up-to-date on vaccinations, feed them a high-quality diet, and seek veterinary treatment at the first sign of illness. Since the disease is spread by bite wounds, you can safely keep an FIV-positive cat with FIV-negative cats if the cats get along well together. However, careful monitoring of the cats' behavior and minimizing the likelihood of fights is recommended. Spaying and neutering of stray or feral cats will cut down on transmission in these cat populations.

If you have a cat with FIV, remember to work closely with your veterinarian regarding

vaccinations and health care. There is currently a vaccine available for FIV, but you and your veterinarian should decide together whether or not to vaccinate your cats. Remember, too, that FIV-positive cats can live long, happy lives with the proper care.

Dr. Virginia Clemans was Best Friends' chief veterinarian from 2001 to 2004. She now resides in Salt Lake City, where she is chief of staff for the Utah County Fix, a low-cost, high-volume spay/neuter and vaccine clinic sponsored by No More Homeless Pets in Utah, Maddie's Fund and Best Friends Animal Society.