



Ask the Vet



AboutFeline Immunodeficiency Virus

FIV or Feline Aids, are the terms commonly used by veterinarians to describe the recently discovered disease that is very similar to HIV and AIDS in humans. The difference is in the antigen produced and the species specificity, meaning this disease is only specific for felines. The disease was discovered in 1986 in a California cattery. Since that time and with the subsequent testing of cats, the disease has been found in every state and all other countries. The prevalence of the disease varies from 1.2% in low risk groups to as high as 14% in sick cats.

The virus is present in saliva, blood and cerebrospinal fluid. The only natural mode of transmission known is bite wounds. There has never been any virus isolated in utero on mother's milk therefore there is no known transmission from a positive mother to the kittens. There is also no known transmission from a positive male to a negative female. Due to the fighting among male cats, male cats are twice as likely to be infected than indoor cats. The age range for cats found to be positive ranges from 2 months to 18 years with the median age being 5 years.

Infection seems to be in three stages based on experimental studies. The first stage is an acute stage which occurs 4 to 6 weeks post infection. The signs include fever lasting several days, a low white blood cell count for 4 to 9 weeks and enlarged lymph nodes for 1 to 9 months. Complications that may also occur during this period are anemia, diarrhea, sepsis and cellulitis. After this stage, the cat progresses to an asymptomatic stage where there are no signs of illness observed for months or years. The virus destroys T-lymphocytes which are an important white blood cell. This destruction leads to the chronic stage of progressive immunodeficiency. Other factors that may speed up the progression from asymptomatic to chronic disease is concurrent viral, bacterial or parasitic diseases. Signs of chronic disease include gingivitis, periodontal disease and stomatitis (inflammation of mouth) most commonly. Other signs may include chronic diarrhea, sinusitis, pneumonia, skin disease, unexplained fever, tumors and neurologic signs like aggression or convulsions. Just as with HIV patients, there is an increased incidence of toxoplasmosis.

Diagnosis of the disease involves a blood test that can be performed quickly in a veterinary hospital. This is a test for antibody response to the virus. It takes 2 to 6 weeks for the production of antibody after exposure. The test is considered very accurate but you may get false positive results due to nonspecific cross reacting or false negatives in terminal AIDS.

References:

Sparger, E. Elizabeth and Yamamoto, Janet : Feline Immunodeficiency Virus Infection. Kirk:CVT X p. 530-534.

Zenger, Elizabeth and Wolf, Alice : An Update on Feline Retrovirus Infection. Kirk:CVT XI p. 275-277.

Just as with human AIDS, there is no cure for the disease. The only treatment is supportive care including antibiotics and fluids. Eventually the patient will succumb to a secondary infection.

There is no vaccine for this disease. The only protection you can provide for your cat is to keep it inside away from exposure to free-roaming cats. As always it is recommended that all pets be neutered to keep them at home, to decrease both behavior and health problems. Even though there is no major transmission through casual or close contact, it is not recommended to keep positive FIV cats with noninfected cats. There are some homes who do choose to keep positive and negative cats together.

These are tests where time will tell if these negative cats become positive. Hopefully with continued research both FIV and HIV will become better understood for treatment and most importantly for prevention. 🐾

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TIPS ON DOGS

In praising dogs I always use the words "What a good dog." I have lined a class of dogs up and told the owners to praise them in their usual manner, then told them to prefix the phrase with the word "what." The effect on the dogs is undeniable. For some extraordinary reason the word "what" electrifies them and gives them so much more pleasure than ordinary praise. After telling listeners to a broadcast to say this to their dogs, I had dozens of letters saying it really does work. *Barbara Woodhouse, "No Bad Dogs"*

