



Feline Distemper

Also known as panleukopenia (meaning “all-white shortage”), feline distemper is caused by a parvovirus that is present virtually every place that is not regularly disinfected. It is extremely stable in the environment and therefore it’s expected that all cats will be exposed to this virus at some time in their lives. Feline distemper is a life-threatening disease and the infection is highly contagious among unvaccinated cats, usually those living in groups. An infected cat sheds large amounts of virus in all body secretions including feces, vomit, urine, saliva and mucus.

Feline distemper virus enters the body through the mouth or the nose and whether illness results depends on the immunity the cat has versus the number of individual viral particles entering the body. Because most cats are exposed to panleukopenia at some point it is unusual for kittens not to have some immunity to the virus, and since the vaccine for distemper is very effective the average house cat is very well protected.

After the virus enters by inhalation or ingestion it begins to infect rapidly dividing cells. The lymph nodes of the throat are first and then over the next week the virus hits the bone marrow and the intestine. The virus suppresses the production of all types of white blood cells, which is where it gets its name. This leaves the cat vulnerable to the virus and open to other infections as well. In the cat’s intestine the virus causes ulceration that leads to diarrhea (dehydration) and bacterial infections as the barrier between the body and intestinal bacteria is lost. Infected cats usually die from the dehydration or the secondary bacterial infections.

Clinical signs of feline distemper may include fever, appetite loss, diarrhea and/or vomiting with a **very** low white blood cell count.

Kittens with these symptoms and white cell counts this low should be tested for the infection. There is a test designed to detect parvovirus in the stool of dogs that can be used to detect the virus in cats (canine parvovirus is a mutation of the feline distemper virus) and combined with the patient’s symptoms a diagnosis can be made. Laboratory methods including virus isolation, PCR testing and antibody titers are also potential tests for distemper.

A cat infected with the virus can survive if they can be kept alive until their immune system recovers from the panleukopenia and can beat the infection. Typical treatment includes antibiotics and aggressive fluid therapy to control dehydration. There is little chance of survival without hospitalization, but cats that do beat the infection generally recover without any permanent damage and have lifetime immunity.

The virus is shed by the cat for up to six weeks after recovery so it is advisable to disinfect the environment and vaccinate any new cats.

At WHVC we offer a vaccine for panleukopenia in combination with feline rhinotracheitis virus and feline calicivirus, both of which can cause acute respiratory symptoms in cats. These

symptoms may include sneezing, nasal inflammation, nasal and ocular discharge, oral ulceration and pneumonia. These viruses are spread by direct contact between infected cats and by contact with contaminated objects in the environment. The vaccine is efficacious and is recommended for all healthy kittens and adult cats.