



FELINE IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS

FIV is classified as a lentivirus in the same family of retroviruses as Feline leukemia. FIV positive cats may be asymptomatic for years but infection eventually leads to immune system suppression that leaves the cat susceptible to other infections that can cause severe illness or death.

Cats most at risk for infection are outdoor cats that may fight with and be bitten by a cat with FIV. Bite wounds seem to be the primary route of transmission for this virus but rarely FIV is transmitted to kittens by an infected mother cat either during passage through the birth canal or through infected milk. Sexual transfer is possible but is not a major means of spreading the disease.

FIV is commonly diagnosed by an in-hospital blood test that detects the presence of antibodies in the infected cat's blood. It takes about eight to twelve weeks after infection before detectable levels of antibodies appear in circulation. It's rare for cats to ever eliminate infection so the presence of antibodies is considered a positive indication of infection, but a false-positive can be ruled out using a test of a different format. Kittens born to infected mothers may receive positive results for several months after birth but few actually are or will become infected. Kittens tested at younger than six months of age should be retested at sixty day intervals until they are at least six months old.

A vaccine for FIV does exist but is not available at WHVC. We don't recommend the vaccine because the risk associated with vaccination seems to outweigh the benefit. First, the vaccine was made using two out of five strains of the virus and tested using only one strain. What does this mean? It means that vaccination may not be protecting cats at all because certain strains of the virus are found in certain geographical areas and the strains used to make the vaccine aren't necessarily those your cat will encounter. Also, the vaccine contains an adjuvant to improve its ability to stimulate the immune system, which has been linked to vaccine-associated sarcomas in cats.

Yearly testing for outdoor cats at risk is recommended since FIV can live in the body for years undetected before AIDS develops and immune suppression unmask the infection. Cats positive for FIV should be kept indoors to prevent the spread of the disease and to reduce their exposure to infectious agents. FIV infected cats should be spayed or neutered and should be fed nutritionally complete and balanced diets, keeping in mind that raw diets should be avoided due to the risk of food-borne bacterial and parasitic infections. There is no cure for FIV and treatment consists of supportive care for an immuno-compromised cat.