

Feline FIV explained and common questions answered

What is FIV and how does it cause disease?

Feline immunodeficiency virus (Cat AIDS) affects cats and it is NOT transmissible to people. The virus targets the cells of the immune system killing or damaging them. This causes a gradual decline in the cats' immune function. The immune system is very important for fighting off infection and therefore FIV infected cats are at a far greater risk of disease and infection from other bacteria, viruses etc.

Which cats are at risk and how is it spread?

The most common method of transmission is from a bite during fighting. Therefore entire male cats with a free living lifestyle or feral/stray cats carry a higher risk of infection. Due to the high number of feral/stray cats in Dubai and the non-establishing of hierarchy due to the high expat population and their frequent moves, FIV virus infection is fairly high amongst this population.

Infection can also occur by close social contact by sharing of food bowls and mutual grooming. A small number of kittens born to infected queens can become infected while in the womb or by ingesting infected milk.

Any cat can be infected at any age but there is often a considerable delay between infection and development of clinical signs therefore the appearance of disease occurs more commonly in middle aged to elderly cats and cats that have recently been exposed to stress due to travelling from abroad or moving into a new house/area.

What are the clinical signs of FIV infection?

The clinical signs associated with FIV are fairly non-specific. The disease process can be divided into 3 phases:

- Early infection may show short term signs of illness including depression, lethargy and high temperature.
- Apparent good health despite infection.
- Eventually other signs associated with the disease develop. This is sometimes referred to as the feline aids stage. Multiple persistent or recurrent diseases may develop with various signs such as lethargy, weight loss, inappetence, fever, inflamed gums, vomiting and diarrhoea. The cat will eventually not be able to fight these infections and the disease eventually becomes terminal.

How is FIV diagnosed?

There are several tests available. Some can be performed in the clinic. These tests detect antibodies to the virus. As with most diagnostic tests they are not 100% accurate and can produce some false positive or false negative results.

We are able to send samples away to external laboratories for more sensitive test if the initial antibody test gives any doubt or confusing result.

What treatment options are available?

To date there is no treatment for the viral infection. The main aim of treatment is to manage any infections or illnesses promptly and to help maintain a good quality of life.

What should be the long term management of these cats?

Cats with FIV should:

1. Be confined indoors. Firstly prevent the spread of virus to other cats and secondly to reduce the exposure of the FIV positive cat to infectious diseases.
2. Receive good nutrition. They should be fed a nutritionally balanced and complete feline diet. Raw food should be avoided, because of the risk of food-borne bacterial and parasitic infections.
3. Have routine parasite control including worms, fleas and ticks.
4. Have a yearly vaccination.
5. Receive a wellness examination every 6 months to promptly detect changes in their health status.
6. Be neutered. Neutered animals are less likely to roam outside the house or interact aggressively with other cats within the household.

What is the prognosis for infected cats? Should an FIV positive cat be euthanized?

The prognosis for FIV infected cats remains guarded, however many can remain healthy for extended periods with the above management guidelines. Generally euthanasia is not necessary until the end stage of the disease develops.

What are the chances of other cats in the same household as an FIV positive cat being infected?

Other cats in the household may already be infected with FIV but show no signs of illness. Generally the spread of FIV between cats through social contact is very poor; however the risk of spread is higher if the FIV-infected cat fights with your other cats.

We recommend that the other cats in your household are also tested. If they are negative there are 2 options:

1. Re-home the FIV positive cat to a house with no other cats or the FIV negative cat to a new home.
2. As the risk of FIV spreading to other cats by social contact is low many people choose to keep the FIV positive cat. In this case the cat should have a separate feeding bowl from the other cats and food should not be put down for all the cats to share.

Vaccination?

While there is a vaccine available in the US, there is limited information on its effectiveness.

The production of antibodies in response to vaccination interferes with the in-house tests we use to detect FIV infection. We therefore do not vaccinate for FIV in this clinic.

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