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What is Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV)?

As its name suggests, this is the cat equivalent of HIV, the cause of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). Being FIV or HIV positive is not the same as having AIDS. AIDS describes the terminal stages of disease which may not occur for many years. FIV positive only means that your cat has been infected by the virus.

How do cats get FIV?

FIV is transmitted primarily by biting. Cats which are known fighters, such as those with a history of cat bite abscesses, have a higher risk of being FIV positive. Kittens can also be infected at birth, probably through virus that is present in the queen's milk. Around a quarter to a third of kittens born to an infected queen are likely to be infected themselves. Normal social interactions such as grooming have a very low risk of transmitting FIV. It is not possible for an owner to transfer the infection to their own cat if they have touched a cat with FIV.

Are people or other animals species at risk from the virus?

NO. Although HIV is a similar virus, there is no risk of cross infection. The virus does not affect any other in contact pets such as dogs, rabbits, etc.

Are other cats in the household at risk?

Risks to other cats in the household is low, unless the infected cat is a fighter. The virus doesn't survive long in the environment so disinfection isn't of great value. It's advisable to feed the positive cat from a separate food bowl as saliva can have large amounts of virus in it.

How is FIV diagnosed?

FIV is diagnosed on a blood test which looks for the presence of antibodies to the virus. If this test is positive, it's likely that your cat is infected by the virus. False positive tests may occur if for example an infected queen has passed on her antibodies (but not the virus) to her kittens. Kittens who test positive should be retested when they are six months old. Some virus positive cats will not reveal a positive result on the usual blood test so we may have to have a more sophisticated test carried out.

Will my cat recover?

As far as we know, once a cat is infected with the virus it will remain infected for the rest of its life, though it isn't clear if all infected cats will become ill.

What type of disease does FIV cause?

FIV gradually destroys the immune system so the cat becomes unable to respond properly to other infections. A vast range of signs have been associated with FIV infection including-

1. Inflammation of the gums / mouth.
2. Weight loss.
3. Poor appetite.
4. Fever.
5. Inflammation of the membrane around the eye.
6. Swollen glands.
7. Vomiting and diarrhoea.

These signs are very non-specific. Many other diseases can show similar changes but suspicions of FIV may be raised if a cat doesn't respond as well as expected to treatment or has a recurring condition.

Is there any treatment?

Secondary infections can be effectively treated with antibiotics but no specific treatment for the virus exists. Some cats have been treated with human anti-HIV drugs such as AZT, with limited success. Evening primrose oil seems to be helpful, particularly in the earlier stages following infection. Other drugs which provide a boost to the immune system also seem to provide some help. Once a cure or prevention exists for HIV it is anticipated that we will be able to offer the same for our feline patients.

Should I have my cat put to sleep?

Generally this isn't necessary until the late stages of disease. Like HIV, cats with FIV have a long period (often several years) where they appear healthy and show no obvious signs.

How can I help my cat?

You can help your cat by ensuring it has a healthy life style and good quality food, together with regular worming and annual booster vaccinations (dead vaccine). Any infections should be treated promptly. Keeping your cat indoors is also a good idea, as it reduces the likelihood of your cat picking up infections from other cats, as well as reducing the spread of the virus from your cat to other cats.

How do you stop cats becoming infected?

As most cats become infected from bite wounds during fighting, the risk of infection can be minimised by making sure your cat is neutered and, where possible, kept in at night, as this is the most common time for cat fights.