

FELINE IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS (FIV)

Introduction

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) is a viral infection that can affect cats. It was first recognised some 20 years ago, but has probably existed in the cat population for much longer. It is a slow growing lentivirus, occurring in cats world wide and can cause significant disease. FIV only affects cats and should not be confused with the similar sounding Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).

Incidence and transmission

About 6% of cats in the UK carry FIV, with entire toms and feral cats the most likely to be infected. FIV is present in the blood and saliva of infected cats and the usual route of transmission is through cat fights. FIV is rare in cats less than one year of age, although FIV positive queens sometimes pass the virus to their unborn kittens. There is no evidence so far for sexual transmission. The virus is extremely fragile and does not survive long outside the cat's body. Although cats are rarely affected through casual contact with an FIV positive cat, it would be wise to feed an infected cat separately from other cats, and use separate dishes.

Disease in Cats

The development of symptoms – the onset of “feline AIDS” – is dependant on a number of factors such as the dose of virus transmitted, the age at the time of infection, the route of infection and the potential for the variation in the degree of virulence of the virus.

In the initial stage The cat may have a fever and swollen lymph nodes. Then follows a period of **remission** during which time the cat appears normal. This can last for months to many years. Eventually the cat succumbs to the infection and may develop symptoms including infections of the mouth, diarrhoea and/or respiratory symptoms. Eventual decline and whole body

system failures are the common sequel, but some cases are very chronic and the animals go for months or years into terminal illness.

Diagnosis

When a cat becomes infected with FIV, there may be no clinical signs for many years. However, it is known that four to six weeks after infection the white blood cell count declines and some cats will have swollen lymph nodes. Some cats can have fever, anaemia, or diarrhoea at this early stage. FIV depletes a type of white blood cell, the T-helper cell, which is critical for an effective immune system.

FIV is usually diagnosed by using a blood test which detects antibodies against the virus in the bloodstream of the cat. However, some cats that have FIV test negative on the antibody test. More advanced tests check for the presence of the virus. Vets commonly test cats for FIV as well as for feline leukaemia virus (FeLV) at the same time if there are unexplained chronic symptoms of disease.

Treatment and Prevention in Cats

No vaccine is currently available in the UK to prevent FIV infections. Owners can protect their cats only by preventing them from contacting infected cats. Some animal shelters routinely test for FIV and FeLV before cats are adopted, but the costs preclude many shelters from conducting these tests. If the tests have not been conducted, potential adopters could offer to pay for the tests before adoption is finalised; or could arrange for their own veterinary surgeon to perform the tests after adoption. If cats test positive, there is no need to have them euthanased unless they are in the later stages, and are unwell. Because FIV-positive cats have a weakened immune system, particular care is needed to keep them safe from other infections and free from parasites – seek advice from your veterinary surgeon. Recent research at the University of Glasgow found that FIV-positive cats can enjoy a long disease free period before symptoms develop. And a study in France found that FIV infected feral cats enjoyed as long a life as non-infected cats.

However, healthy cats that test positive and that are aggressive towards other cats are at definite risk of transmitting the virus through bite wounds. Owners of such cats need to take their responsibilities seriously and consider whether they could keep the cat indoors, or build a cat enclosure attached to their house to allow some outdoor exercise without risking other cats in the community. If these options are not possible for aggressive cats, euthanasia should also be considered. Owners should be guided in these decisions by their veterinary surgeon.

Therapy of the secondary infections associated with FIV is based on the clinical signs and the nature of the infectious agent. Symptomatic supportive treatment of these cats is indicated, but always with the caution that eventually little can be done to stem the inevitable collapse of the cat's immune system.

FIV and Humans

Although FIV is similar structurally to HIV and causes a disease in cats similar to AIDS in humans, it is a highly species-specific agent. FIV infections are restricted solely to cats. However, immuno-suppressed humans, the elderly or the very young may catch some of the secondary infections associated with FIV positive cats. Ask your veterinary surgeon about taking special care of an FIV cat.

Conclusion

Cats may harbour FIV for many years prior to developing any signs. There is no reason why healthy FIV-positive cats or those in the early stages of developing symptoms need to be euthanised as long as they are not suffering in any way. Only cats are affected by FIV – humans and other species are not at risk. Follow your veterinary surgeon's advice about special care measures.

Pets are Good for People

Pets provide us with loyalty, companionship, love and affection, as well as the many physical and psychological benefits. The least we can do to repay this

is to ensure that we keep them in the best of health. A healthy pet is a happy pet and a happy pet can help us enjoy a much fuller and more rewarding life.

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For further information, please contact the Pet Health Council on:

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