

This Serious Disorder Is an Invitation for Love, Not Rejection

Once an animal is labeled with this condition, owners become frightened and tragically, these poor victims are left behind in shelters. And that's too bad, because it's not a transferable disease to humans or other pets, and affected animals often live as long as their healthy counterparts.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many people incorrectly assume cats with the feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) don't live normal, healthy lives, or that FIV is easily spread to other animals and humans
- The truth is that cats can only transmit the virus to other cats (not to humans or other animals) through deep bites; casual contact and even superficial bites and scratches won't spread the virus
- Unfounded myths surrounding FIV mean that fewer infected homeless cats are adopted, so shelter organizations are working to raise awareness that FIV-positive kitties can and do live long, healthy lives
- There are many things you can do as the guardian of an FIV kitty to insure your feline family member remains happy and healthy for a lifetime

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One of the more serious disorders kitties acquire is the feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV). Just the name alone is unnerving for many cat parents because they immediately associate it with HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) and AIDS in humans.

FIV does belong to the same class of viruses as HIV, which is the precursor of AIDS, but there's no reason to be alarmed. Humans can't get FIV and cats can't get HIV. FIV is also in the same retrovirus family as the feline leukemia virus (FeLV), but there are several differences between the two.

FIV is what is known as a "slow virus" (lentivirus) that multiplies slowly and has a long incubation period before causing symptoms. Immunodeficiency means the body is unable to mount a normal immune response.

The good news is that while FIV is a significant disease that requires careful management, it's far from a death sentence for kitties. Studies over the last decade have shown that FIV-positive cats often live as long as cats without the virus, and many never even show signs of illness.¹

Risk of Cat-to-Cat FIV Transmission Is Actually Quite Low

According to the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine's Feline Health Center, in the U.S., approximately 1.5% to 3% of otherwise healthy cats are infected with FIV. In sick kitties or those at increased risk of infection, the rate is significantly higher at 15% or more.²

The disease is most often seen in free-roaming, aggressive male cats. This is because the virus, which is present in saliva and blood, is transmitted primarily through bites. It can't be spread to people, dogs or other non-feline pets, and indoor-only kitties are much less likely to be infected.

The average age at diagnosis is 5 years, and the risk of infection increases with age. There is no genetic predisposition for the condition, although genetics may play a role in disease progression and severity.

An infected cat can transmit the virus to another kitty, but it's a rare occurrence. Transmission requires a deep bite by an infected cat to an uninfected cat. Casual contact doesn't appear to spread the virus, which is why friendly kitties in stable multi-cat households are at little risk of acquiring FIV.

FIV survives for only a brief time outside a cat's body, and it can't be transmitted indirectly on food, food bowls, toys, bedding or human clothes, shoes or hands (this is not the case with **feline leukemia**, however).

Rarely, an infected mother cat can transmit the virus to her kittens either during passage through the birth canal or while nursing. Sexual contact is not considered a major means of transmission.

Sadly, Myths About FIV Mean Fewer Cat Adoptions

Some of the pets least likely to be adopted at animal shelters across the U.S. are kitties with FIV. Prospective pet owners are hesitant to adopt an FIV-positive cat, but shelter experts are working to change attitudes through increased awareness.

The shelter community wants pet parents to know that while adopted stray cats may carry the virus, it's not something to be overly concerned about. "Due to the fact people just don't understand it, they're apprehensive," says Kathleen Hacker of Shelter Angels Inc. in Bay County, Michigan.³

"Two years ago with this diagnosis," says Hacker, "people would automatically put the cats down. More and more we're hearing people saying, 'Oh, I have an FIV cat.'"

Some of the myths about FIV-positive cats that shelters are working to debunk include:

- "Cats with FIV should be euthanized because they're unadoptable or too risky to place." Fact: FIV positive kitties are no less adoptable than uninfected cats, live long healthy lives in stable environments, and without infecting other family pets.
- "Infected cats can spread FIV by casual contact with other cats, including mutual grooming." Fact: FIV is only transmitted through deep bite wounds that draw blood.
- "FIV positive kitties become ill and die at an early age." Fact: FIV cats don't have a higher incidence of disease than uninfected kitties, and don't die sooner.

CatChat.org, a cat rescue resource, believes FIV in stray cats has fed much of the unfounded fear of kitties with the virus. The primary carriers in the stray population are intact male cats who fight over "food, females or territory." According to CatChat:

"The stray cat has no-one to look after them, and their lifestyle means they are more likely to pick up other infections, which without treatment can escalate. When one of these gets captured and taken to a vet, suffering from any number of secondary infections, it is often too late.

It is the nature of a vet's work, that they will see many more ill cats than healthy ones, when in fact, there are very many more healthy FIV cats than ill ones — they just don't need to see the vet.

Indeed, many pet cats will already be FIV positive, but their owners are unaware of it due to the cat being perfectly healthy!"⁴

FIV Symptoms

An FIV-positive cat can appear entirely healthy for years or even a lifetime. But in some cats the disease creates a state of immune deficiency that can leave them susceptible to other infections.

This means that everyday bacteria, viruses and fungi that cause no problems for healthy animals can cause serious illness in cats with compromised immune systems. Secondary infections are responsible for many of the diseases linked to FIV.

Early in an FIV infection, lymph nodes throughout the body are affected, resulting in temporary enlargement of the nodes, and often, a fever. This stage of infection often passes unnoticed unless the lymph nodes grow noticeably large.

The course of FIV can cause a progressive deterioration of health, or recurrent bouts of illness interspersed with periods of relatively normal health. Symptoms of immunodeficiency can occur anywhere in a cat's body and include:

- Recurrent minor illnesses, often involving the upper respiratory tract and gastrointestinal tract
- Persistent bacterial or fungal infections of the ears and skin
- Inflammation of the gums is seen in 25% to 50% of cases
- Fever and wasting, especially in the later stages
- Upper respiratory tract disease is seen in 30% of cases
- Cancer, especially lymphoma
- Chronic eye problems, glaucoma
- Poor coat condition
- Chronic kidney insufficiency
- Persistent diarrhea is seen in 10% to 20% of cases

Another group of FIV symptoms affects the nervous system, and can include disruption of normal sleep patterns, behavioral changes such as pacing and aggression, changes in vision and hearing and disorders affecting the nerves in the legs and paws.

Caring for an FIV-Positive Cat

There is no specific treatment for the virus itself, however, any existing secondary infections will need to be treated. FIV-positive cats should be kept indoors, which will prevent the spread of the virus to other cats, while also reducing the risk that your kitty will be exposed to pathogens her immune system may not be able to handle. FIV-positive cats should not breed.

Cats with the virus should be fed a balanced, nutritionally complete species-appropriate diet. A raw, unpasteurized diet is fine unless your kitty has a low white blood cell count, in which case I recommend cooked fresh food or sterile raw food (about half of all commercially available raw foods have by sterilized through high pressure pasteurization).

Cats with FIV should see the veterinarian at least twice yearly to review the health of their eyes, gums, skin and lymph nodes, and to check their weight. At one of these visits each year, bloodwork and a urinalysis should be performed. Any abnormal values should be rechecked as your vet suggests.

Careful, consistent monitoring of your FIV-positive kitty's health and behavior is extremely important so that you can notify your vet right away of any changes.

I've had success keeping my FIV-positive patients very healthy using a variety of natural supplements to support the immune system, including medicinal mushrooms, Standard Process Feline Immune System Support and Whole Body Support, turmeric, Kyosenex Prime, Chinese herbs and FIV homeopathic nosodes. Ozone therapy can also be very beneficial for FIV cats who become symptomatic.

Sources and References

¹ [dvm360, January 5, 2017](#)

² [Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine](#)

³ [Michigan Live, February 16, 2016](#)

⁴ [CatChat.org](#)
