

INFORMATION REGARDING FIV AND FeLV

Adam and FIV - Feline Immunodeficiency Virus

In 1992, Adam, a feral cat I trapped as a kitten in July 1990, escaped from my house one night. He came back the next night, bleeding from deep bite wounds to his neck. The emergency veterinarian, who treated Adam, said the wounds were probably caused by the canine teeth of another cat.

A few months later, Adam developed a high fever and a severe upper respiratory infection. Both were difficult to treat and, again, as with Morris, my veterinarian suggested retesting Adam. We found that he had contracted FIV.

This wonderful, very good-natured cat recovered from the initial infection and eventually weighed 14 pounds. He went on to live a happy and healthy life until June 2000. His death was not related to the FIV infection.

The Cornell Feline Health Center reports that:

- The primary mode of transmission is through bite wounds. Casual, non-aggressive contact does not appear to be an efficient route of spreading FIV; as a result, cats in households with stable social structures where housemates do not fight are at little risk for acquiring FIV infections.
- On rare occasions infection is transmitted from an infected mother cat to her kittens, usually during passage through the birth canal or when the newborn kittens ingest infected milk. Sexual contact is not a major means of spreading FIV.

What is FIV?

It is a lentivirus, the same family as feline leukemia, but they are different in many ways, including the way they affect cats.

How many cats are infected?

In the U.S. on average 1.5 to 3% of cats are infected FIV.

How does it affect a cat?

The first onset of the virus cause swollen lymph nodes and fever. The disease eventually leads to a weakened immune system and the cat will become susceptible to other virus and bacteria. Adam used to react severely to fleas. One flea bite and he was a mess. Regular monthly treatment with Revolution, Frontline or Advantage helped greatly. Weight loss is a sign, as well as gingivitis of the gums, and stomatitis of the mouth, diarrhea and other infections.

Were my other cats ever at risk?

Adam had been living with my other rescued stray and feral cats for some time before these feline viruses attacked him, he did not fight, he was very friendly, therefore I never at any time kept them separated from my other cats. I randomly retested nine of my other cats a few years later, and they all tested negative for BOTH FeLV and FIV. During the first few years I routinely vaccinated for FeLV, but with the growing literature on vaccine-induced fibrosarcomas, and the mounting evidence that we overvaccinate our cats and that vaccinations last longer than was initially thought, I have stopped the yearly vaccinations, and prefer to do them every three years.

Summary:

It concerns me greatly that many cats are routinely killed when they test positive for either of these viruses. It is gratifying to see so much information on the internet nowadays about positive results many have had by giving their cats a chance at life, and providing them with supportive care and treatments. A great deal of information is to be found on Cornell Feline Health Center's website.

Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV): Not Necessarily a Death Sentence

There are three things that can happen after a cat becomes infected with the feline leukemia virus:

1. Cats (usually young kittens) become extremely ill and die within a few months.
2. Cats fight off the initial infection and become immune
3. Cats sequester the virus in their bone marrow or central nervous system. They can then suppress it forever, or it may become active later in life. At this stage the virus cannot be transmitted to other cats

In 1991, when I first heard that one of my rescued feral cats, Morris, had tested positive for feline leukemia I was devastated. In those days, the feelings about FeLV were pretty negative and myths abounded. Morris was trapped at four months of age and initially tested negative, however he soon developed a severe upper respiratory infection that would not clear. He also lost a lot of weight and my veterinarian suggested another test, which he sent to the lab. This time it came back positive.

Fortunately, my veterinarian Dr. Pervaiz Manzoor, was always willing to work with me and to try new methods. He helped me stabilize Morris and was open to my suggestion of giving the cat the drug Interferon to boost his immune system. After a few months of intensive supportive therapy, Morris actually starting gaining weight and looking well again.

We have retested a now very healthy Morris, and each time the tests come back from the lab with a negative result. The virus has obviously cleared from his bloodstream. We have also retested several of the cats Morris has lived with for many years. These tests have all been negative for FeLV.

However lately Morris has developed severe gingivitis/stomatitis. This has been an on-going problem for him and it is very difficult for me to medicate him. He still retains some

feral instincts and because eating hurts his mouth, he has associated food served by me with pain. My vet has extracted most of Morris' teeth and this has helped a lot.

Not having teeth is *not* the worst thing in the world for a cat that lives in a home and is provided with food. They can still eat dry food as well as moist. I have found that chunky foods—the ones in pouches—are easier for Morris to eat than ground mashed foods, as these stick to his gums and to his remaining teeth and cause more pain.

To treat stomatitis, some recommend a combination of drugs—a“cocktail” consisting of Interferon, Medrol, and Clinadrops.

Cats Respond to treatment with Acemannan.

Veterinarians at the Texas A & M College of Veterinary Medicine Small Animal clinic had good results treating persistently infected cats with acemannan for six weeks. Acemannan, an aloe vera derivative, has a stimulating effect on the immune system.

So do not despair if you rescue a cat who tests positive for FeLV. This is not necessarily a death sentence. The cat may still live a good, long, healthy life. Before you decide to euthanize a cat with FeLV, do discuss these options with your vet. Improving the immune system definitely seems to result in an excellent chance of saving an animals' life.