



Alley Cat Rescue, Inc.
Leading the way for
Humane care for all cats.

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Health Care for Feral Cats: Guidelines for Colony Caretakers

The overall health and life expectancy of feral cats

Those opposed to TNR programs claim outdoor cats are suffering, diseased, and living a life of extreme misery. No doubt there are some *unmanaged* colonies in unhealthy condition, but just as often the cats we see in managed colonies are hardy survivors and very healthy. The Feral Cat Spay/Neuter Project located in Washington state has noted that, after treating over 30,000 cats, their euthanasia rate is 0.2 percent, or two cats out of 1,000, and “the vast majority is in good physical health” (Feral Cat Spay/Neuter Project, 2006). And a study performed on a Florida college campus over the course of 11 years reported that more than 80 percent of the cats had been residents for more than six years; which is comparable to the mean lifespan of 7.1 years for household cats (Levy et al., 2003).

As for the occurrence of viral diseases, such as feline leukemia (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV), large epidemiologic studies “indicate FeLV and FIV are present in approximately 4% of feral cats, which is not substantially different from the infection rate reported for pet cats” (Levy and Crawford, 2004).

In 2012, Alley Cat Rescue surveyed rescue organizations across the United States that provide TNR services to their communities and out of the 120 groups that responded, 25 percent reported the average age of colony cats to be around six to eight years old. Another 35 percent said the feral cats they assist are between nine and 12 years old, with more than 14 percent reporting feral cats in their communities to be 13 years old and above (Alley Cat Rescue, 2012).

Feline viral diseases

The major feline viral diseases are feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV). These viruses are specific to cats and cannot be transmitted to humans or other animals.

Feline leukemia virus (FeLV)

The signs and symptoms of infection with FeLV are varied and include loss of appetite, poor coat condition, infections of the skin, bladder and respiratory tract, oral disease, seizures, swollen lymph nodes, fatigue, fever, weight loss, recurring bacterial and viral illnesses, anemia, diarrhea and jaundice (Cornell, “Feline Leukemia Virus,” 2014). Some cats can be carriers of the disease and show no signs of illness for many years.

Infected cats shed FeLV primarily in their saliva, although the virus may also be present in the blood, tears, feces, or urine. Other modes of FeLV transmission include mutual grooming, sharing food dishes and litter boxes, and in utero transfer from a mother cat to her kittens. A mother cat can also transmit FeLV to her kittens through infected milk.

Most TNR programs choose not to test feral cats for the disease. Whether a feral cat tests negative for the disease or she is not tested, we strongly recommend all feral cats receive a FeLV vaccine to reduce the risk of transmission.

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV)

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) is a retrovirus that virologists classify as a lentivirus, or "slow-acting virus" (Cornell, "Feline Immunodeficiency Virus," 2014). Cats diagnosed with FIV may live long, healthy lives, never showing symptoms of the virus, though some cats may experience "recurrent illness interspersed with periods of relative health" (Cornell, "Feline Immunodeficiency Virus," 2014).

Fortunately, FIV is not transmitted as easily as FeLV. The primary mode of transmission is through bite wounds. This explains why the cats most likely to become infected are free-roaming, unneutered males prone to territorial fighting. FIV does not spread through casual contact among cats, so it is possible to keep a FIV-infected cat in the same household as a healthy cat with little risk of transmission, provided the cats tolerate each other and do not fight.

To test or not to test?

Testing for viral diseases such as FeLV and FIV in feral cat colonies should be optional and not mandatory. Funds for sterilization programs are usually limited, so resources may be better spent on sterilization and rabies vaccines rather than on testing. Alley Cat Rescue does not perform testing as part of our standard TNR program.

Operation Catnip's founder, Dr. Julie Levy, points out that the greatest cause of feline deaths in the United States is the killing -- by humans -- of unwanted stray and feral cats, which causes more deaths than all feline infectious diseases combined (Levy and Crawford, 2004). Subsequently, most TNR programs choose to focus their efforts and resources on sterilization and vaccination rather than testing.

Vaccination protocols for feral cats

Due to the rabies virus being a zoonotic disease, meaning it can be transmitted to humans, most health codes and laws require that all cats receive a rabies vaccination. Along with a rabies vaccine, all feral cats should receive a distemper vaccine. Distemper or feline panleukopenia virus is highly contagious and can cause high mortality in a group of feral cats, usually among kittens, who have weakened immune systems.

ACR strongly recommends providing a three-year rabies vaccination to adequately protect adult feral cats for at least three years, and possibly even longer. In our experience, we have found that five- to seven-year-old feral cats, who are part of managed colonies, are easier to retrap, as opposed to retrapping the cats every year. The cats will know and trust the caretaker and can be more easily trapped. Cats who are trapped too often may become trap-shy, making retrapping much more difficult.

Additional health concerns for feral cats

While being spayed or neutered, the veterinarian will examine the cat's skin for wounds or injuries, making sure to thoroughly clean and treat accordingly. A long-acting antibiotic injection, such as Convenia, is usually administered for post-care of sterilization procedures, and will also aid in reducing and treating any infection.

Parasite infestations are the most common transmittable health concern for feral cats (Levy and Crawford, 2004). These include internal parasites, such as worms and external parasites, such as fleas, ticks, and ear mites. It is highly recommended that TNR programs include treatments to prevent internal and external parasite infestations. Advantage Multi treats a wide range of parasites, so depending on which brand your veterinarian uses, each cat may only need to receive one (monthly) application in order to treat both internal and external parasites. For added protection and to treat severe cases of internal parasites, a topical dewormer such as Profender may also be applied and/or deworming pills and liquids, such as Drontal, can be crushed into wet food. For severe flea infestations, Capstar can be crushed into food and flea powder sprinkled on bedding.

Lastly, create outdoor litter boxes to give cats a place to go to the bathroom. Scooping frequently will help keep cats healthy and free of contracting the parasite toxoplasmosis, a zoonotic disease that can be transmitted to humans. Providing cats an appropriate place to go to the bathroom will also help alleviate any complaints about cats using gardens and flowerbeds as bathrooms.

Conclusion

Using proper equipment and following the guidelines laid out in this factsheet and our "Guidelines for Veterinarians" factsheet, TNR programs can be implemented with minimal mishaps. Gathering as much preliminary information as possible about a feral cat colony prior to trapping and communicating openly will ensure that the caretaker and veterinarian are on the same page.

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