



## Royal Animal Hospital

### Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV)

FIV stands for "feline immunodeficiency virus," just as HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. In fact, these two viruses are closely related and much of the general information that has become common knowledge for HIV also holds true for FIV. FIV is a virus that causes AIDS in cats; however, there is a long asymptomatic period before AIDS occurs and our job is to prolong this asymptomatic period. The average life expectancy from the time of diagnosis for FIV is 5 years. Humans cannot be infected with FIV; FIV is a cats-only infection.



#### How Is FIV Diagnosed?

Most of the time, infection from FIV is discovered using a screening test performed in your veterinarian's office or from a blood panel run at your veterinarian's reference laboratory. Once a cat has been identified as positive by a screening test, a follow-up confirmation

test called a "Western Blot" is the next step. Once this test is positive, the cat is considered to be truly infected.

If you are like most of the cat-owning community, you may have a vague familiarity with the FIV virus but are unclear on the details. You may not even be sure about the difference between the FIV virus and the FeLV virus, and you rely on your veterinarian to tell you what you need to know.

Fortunately, for most cat owners the FIV virus has been an academic matter. A new kitten receives a screening test around age 6 months. Cats are often re-tested when they are ill, but since most of our feline patients live their entire lives indoors, the FIV virus is not of much concern.

For outdoor cats, it is a whole other story. The FIV virus is spread by bite wounds between cats. Adult cats, rather than kittens, are at risk. The American Association of Feline Practitioners recommends that outdoor cats be tested annually for this virus and for the Feline Leukemia Virus (the "FeLV" virus).

FIV, like HIV, can live in its host's body for years before leading to a life-threatening AIDS situation. Ultimately, FIV is suppressive to the immune system and the average life expectancy from the time of diagnosis is 5 years.



FIV infection is preventable by keeping cats indoors and preventing cat fights.

### **How Did My Cat Get Infected?**

The major route of virus transmission is by the deep bite wounds that occur during fighting. There are other means of spreading the virus but they are less common. Mother cats cannot readily infect their kittens (except in the initial stages of infection). FIV can be transmitted sexually and via improperly screened blood transfusions. Casual contact such as sharing food bowls or snuggling is very unlikely to be associated with transmission.

Isolation of an FIV+ cat is not necessary in a stable household unless the FIV+ cat is likely to fight with the other residents.

### **What Do I Do Now?**

Some lifestyle changes will probably be needed now that you know you have an FIV+ cat.

- **No Raw Foods**  
There are currently numerous fad diets involving raw foods for pets. It is crucial that one not succumb to these popular recommendations when it comes to the FIV+ cat. Uncooked foods, meats especially, can include parasites and pathogens that a cat with a normal immune system might be able to handle but an FIV+ cat might not. Stick to the major reputable cat food brands.
- **Vaccination**  
Vaccination should be continued for these cats just as they are for other cats. Some experts recommend using only killed vaccines to avoid any possible reversion to virulence of the live vaccine virus strains. This has not panned out as a problem in reality, plus the killed vaccines have been associated with vaccine-associated fibrosarcomas, an additional problem an FIV+ cat does not need. We still recommend live virus vaccines for FIV+ cats just as we do for FIV- cats.

- **Parasite Control**

The last thing an FIV+ cat needs is fleas, worms, or mites. There are numerous effective products on the market for parasite control. Consult with your veterinarian about which parasites you should be especially concerned with and which product is right for you.

- **Immune-Stimulating Agents**

Our hospital recommends Interferon Alpha for asymptomatic cats as it is relatively inexpensive and our impression is that it helps. Interferon alpha is used in an extremely dilute form (not the much higher anti-viral doses) and is used as a salty liquid added to the cat's food or administered orally on a daily basis.

- **General Monitoring**

While a non-geriatric FIV- cat should have an annual examination, the FIV+ cat should have a check-up twice a year. Annually, a full blood panel and urinalysis is prudent. Also, it is important to be vigilant of any changes in the FIV+ cat. Small changes that one might not think would be significant in an FIV- cat, should probably be thoroughly explored in an FIV+ cat.

THE FELINE IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS IS NOT TRANSMISSIBLE TO HUMANS IN ANY WAY.

### **The Immune-Suppressed Owner**

Immune-suppressed cats and immune-suppressed owners do not mix well. Those who are immune suppressed, be they human or non-human, are inclined to become infected with opportunistic organisms, and in turn shed larger numbers of those organisms than one might naturally come into contact with in the environment. This means that someone who is immune-suppressed (human or not) can serve as an amplifier for infectious agents. An immune-suppressed cat can increase an immune-suppressed human's exposure to infectious agents and vice versa. This is obviously not a good situation. The same is true for multiple immune-suppressed cats living together. If possible, there should be only one immune-suppressed individual per home.