

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV)

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- Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) was first discovered in 1986 in a cattery in California
- It appears likely that FIV has been present in cats for a great many years
- The rate of infection varies from about 1% (in healthy cats) to as high as 14% (in ill cats) in Canada and the USA
- FIV is often found in cats who are positive for the feline leukemia virus
- FIV belongs to the same family of viruses as HIV (human immunodeficiency virus)
- This family of viruses (Lenti-viruses) are known for being species specific, for life-long infection, and for slowly progressive diseases
- FIV is not transmittable from cats to people, and HIV is not transmittable from people to cats
- FIV is known to be present in the blood, saliva and cerebrospinal fluid of infected cats. However, the virus is extremely fragile and does not survive outside the cat's body
- The main method of transmission is from one cat to another through a bite wound
- Male cats are twice as likely to be infected with FIV. This reflects the greater tendency of male cats (especially those not neutered) to roam and fight with other cats
- Outdoor, free-roaming cats are more likely to contract FIV than indoor cats
- The average age of infected cats is 3 to 5 years old

When a cat becomes infected with FIV, there may be no clinical signs for many years. However, we know that 4 to 6 weeks after infection the white blood cell count declines and some cats will have swollen lymph nodes. Also, some cats have a fever, anemia, or diarrhea at this early stage. FIV is toxic to a type of white blood cell, the T helper cell, that is critical to a healthy immune system. This virus slowly depresses the function of the cat's immune system, leading to chronic health problems and opportunistic infections. Many FIV-positive cats have chronic inflammatory conditions of the teeth and mouth. Other chronic problems, such as diarrhea, pneumonia, skin disease, sinus infections and some eye diseases as well as neurological problems have been seen in FIV-positive cats.

FIV is diagnosed by using a blood test which detects antibodies against the virus in the bloodstream of the cat. Veterinarians may test a cat for FIV if there are unexplained chronic symptoms of disease in a major body system. As well, the American Association of Feline Practitioners recommends testing cats being introduced into a household to prevent exposing any existing cats to the virus. Kittens under 6 months of age may carry antibodies to FIV acquired from their mother without having the virus itself. Therefore, any kitten under this age who tests positive should be retested when over 6 months old.

There currently is no vaccine available against FIV, but research is actively being conducted toward this goal.