

FAQs About FIV

What is FIV?

FIV stand for feline immunodeficiency virus. It is in the same class of virus as HIV. FIV, which can live in many different tissues in cats, typically weakens the cat's immune system.

How do cats get FIV?

One of the tissues in which FIV lives is the salivary glands, so the most common route of infection is a deep bite wound from a FIV-positive cat to another cat. It can also be transmitted via blood, in utero and from milk from an infected mother cat. It is very rare for cats to get FIV from just being around infected cats, from sharing food bowls, or from a person touching a FIV-positive cat and then touching a FIV-negative cat.

What are the signs of FIV infection?

There are no specific signs of FIV infection. FIV-positive cats have a weaker immune system so they are more prone to getting infections such as upper respiratory infections, ringworm and dental disease. Other than that, FIV-positive cats tend to live normal lives and have a normal length of life.

How do I know if my cat has FIV?

There are no obvious signs of FIV so the only way to know is to do a blood test. The most common is a veterinarian-administered ELISA test (often called a SNAP test), which looks for antibodies to FIV. An antibody is a protein made by the cat in response to FIV infection. A cat can test positive as soon as two to four weeks after exposure, but it can take up to eight weeks.

Kittens under six months of age may test positive after having received antibodies from their mothers, either in utero or via milk. It can take up to six months for these antibodies to go away. Thus, it is a good idea to retest a kitten who tests positive after he or she has reached six months of age.

Can FIV be treated?

There are no proven treatments to rid a cat of FIV. Most FIV-positive cats handle the disease well, but it is important to concentrate on treating the secondary illnesses.

What can be done to prevent the spread of FIV?

Cats should be kept indoors so they do not fight with a FIV-positive cat. Depending on where one lives, the rate of FIV-positive cats ranges from four to 24 percent. A FIV-positive cat can live with a FIV-negative cat as long as both are spayed or neutered, and neither cat is a fighter, or the FIV-positive cat has no teeth. (FIV-positive cats commonly have severe dental disease, which often means it is necessary to remove all their teeth.)

There is a vaccine for FIV, but Best Friends does not recommend it because the vaccine does not have the best efficacy and, after a cat is vaccinated for FIV, the cat will test positive for the virus. At this point, no test can differentiate whether a cat tests positive for FIV from the vaccine or from having the infection. If a cat escapes and is picked up by local animal control, and then tested, the cat may be killed because he or she tests positive.

Can FIV-negative and FIV-positive cats live together?

Yes, as long as the cats get along, are fixed, and do not fight. They can safely share food bowls, water bowls and litter boxes as well as snuggle with each other. The risk that a FIV-positive cat could spread the virus to a FIV-negative cat can be minimized by having them live in separate rooms until you are confident that they will not fight with each other.

Can FIV-positive cats have a good and long life?

FIV-positive cats can live normal lives both in quality and duration. They do take special care in terms of monitoring them for signs of infection and they do have a tendency to have bad dental disease.

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