

What is Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV)?

CATS



There is a lot of misinformation out there about FIV. We're here to share the facts!

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) is a slow-acting virus that weakens a cat's immune system over the years. This makes the cat susceptible to secondary infections. But there's good news: FIV-positive cats who receive regular medical care and live in low-stress, indoor homes can lead long, largely normal lives.

NOTE: Many people confuse FIV with FeLV (Feline Leukemia Virus), but they are very different. In most cases, FIV tends to have less of an impact on lifespan than FeLV. See our handout titled "What is FeLV?" for more information.

How does a cat get FIV?

Cats usually get FIV through a deep puncture wound from a FIV-positive cat. It is also possible for a kitten to get FIV from their mother if she is FIV-positive. (NOTE: Even if a kitten tests positive for FIV, they should get retested at 6 months. False positives are common among kittens.)

Which cats are most at risk of getting FIV?

Any cat can get FIV, but unneutered male cats who live outside are at highest risk. They are the ones most likely to get into serious fights, which often involve puncture wounds deep enough to spread FIV. This is yet another reason we recommend spaying/neutering your cat and keeping them inside.

What are the symptoms of FIV?

Cats can go years without showing any symptoms of FIV. As the virus progresses, a cat's symptoms may come and go or just grow continually worse. Common symptoms include:

- Enlarged lymph nodes
- Persistent fever
- Weight loss
- Poor coat condition
- Poor appetite
- Persistent diarrhea
- Abnormal appearance or inflammation of the eye (conjunctivitis)
- Behavior change
- Stomatitis/dental issues

Veterinarians use a blood test to test for FIV.

How do I prevent my cat from getting FIV?

Keep your cat indoors. That way they can't possibly get bitten by a neighborhood cat who has FIV. You should also test any new cat coming into your household before they interact with your cat.

My cat tested positive for FIV. What do I do?

The first step is to make an appointment with a veterinarian. (If you do not already have a vet you like, check out our list of low-cost clinics!) While there is no way to cure the virus, the veterinarian will help you decide the best management plan for your cat. Some cats with FIV will have short lifespans, while others will have normal lifespans. What you can do to help your cat stay healthy is prevent them from encountering any diseases their immune system can't handle.

The vet may suggest the following:

- A well-balanced diet. Avoid raw food diets – they often contain parasites and pathogens that your cat's immune system may not be able to handle
- Supplements to boost your cat's immune system
- Visiting the vet at least twice per year
- Keeping your cat indoors (not only does this keep your vulnerable cat safe, but it protects the FIV-negative cats in your community)
- Keeping a close eye on your cat's health and behavior. You should bring them to the vet if you notice anything, however small – treating any secondary infections early is key to keeping your cat healthy!

NOTE: There was a vaccine for FIV available until 2015, but it has been discontinued due to ineffectiveness. Any cat that was vaccinated will test positive, which may be true or false.

Is it safe for my family to live with a FIV-positive cat?

For your human family - **yes**. FIV cannot spread to humans. But it may not be a good fit if a human in your household is immunocompromised. When a human and a cat who are both prone to secondary infections live together, they can possibly expose each other to anything they catch.

For your animal family – **also yes**. Only cats can get FIV, so dogs, bunnies, and other species are safe. As for cats, the main way FIV spreads from one cat to another is through a deep puncture wound. They are very unlikely to spread it through sharing food, water, litter boxes, or through sneezing or grooming each other. If your cats generally do not fight with each other, they are unlikely to spread it to each other.

Where can I learn more about FIV?

Here are a few great resources:

- ✘ [The Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine](http://www.vet.cornell.edu) (www.vet.cornell.edu)
- ✘ [International Cat Care](http://icatcare.org) (icatcare.org)
- ✘ [Veterinary Partner](http://veterinarypartner.vin.com) (veterinarypartner.vin.com)

Still have questions about FIV? We're here to help. Check out our list of "Low-Cost Clinics" to find a veterinarian or call/email us directly.

Resources: Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, Veterinary Partner, International Cat Care