

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) Facts

There are frequent misconceptions and misinformation out there about FIV. Unfortunately, even some vets who don't keep up with the latest research on this disease can be mistaken. We offer the information on this page in the interest of enabling you to make an informed decision regarding the adoption of an FIV-positive cat.

What is FIV?

The name pretty well describes it. The Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) is: a) a virus that b) infects cats (felines) and c) causes a deficiency in the cat's immune system.

A cat that is infected by the virus is described as an "FIV-positive cat", meaning that the test used to detect the virus in the cat showed a positive result.

What isn't FIV?

FIV is not HIV, the virus that causes AIDS in people. You can't be infected by FIV. An FIV-positive cat is not a health threat to you or your family. FIV is also not contagious to your non-feline pets.

How is FIV detected?

A blood test can detect the presence of antibodies in the cat, indicating infection. The test is frequently administered as part of a "combo" test used to detect FeLV.

Because a newborn kitten will have antibodies from its mother, the kitten may show a positive test (to the antibodies) without actually being infected. A positive test in a kitten should be repeated when six months old to confirm.

Many adoption groups that test for FeLV will also test for FIV, using the combo test, so you'll know the status of the cat before adoption. Some don't test for it, and this can be justified because FIV is not typically a threat to the well-being of any other pets in the home.

In some cases, the FIV infection is discovered after a cat has been to the vet to treat a bacterial infection that just won't go away, even after rounds of antibiotics.

What are the effects of FIV?

A cat that is infected won't show any obvious symptoms initially. The effect of the virus is to reduce the ability of the cat's immune system to fight off other infections. The result is that the cat is at a higher risk of becoming ill from other diseases.

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) Facts

Is there a vaccine?

There is a vaccine to help prevent the transmission of FIV, but the vaccination is not 100% reliable and will generate antibodies that make it very difficult to determine later whether the cat is infected or only vaccinated. A vaccine may be of little usefulness for the cat owner who keeps cats safely indoors.

Is it expensive to treat?

There is really no treatment for the FIV infection itself. Care should be taken to prevent the FIV-positive cat from being exposed to cats that are sick with upper respiratory infections, are FeLV-positive, etc. because the FIV-positive cat is less able to fight off infection by these secondary diseases.

An FIV-positive cat should receive routine vaccinations against rabies and feline distemper like any other cat. If it is likely that the FIV-positive cat may be exposed to other diseases such as FeLV, it may be worthwhile to consider vaccination against those as well.

Because an FIV-positive cat is at higher risk for other diseases, the pet owner may be at higher risk for vet bills.

How long with an FIV-positive cat live?

Unfortunately, a cat infected with FIV is likely to die younger than an uninfected cat. The lifespan depends somewhat on how lucky the cat is in avoiding secondary infection. 10 to 12 years is not uncommon, but neither is 2 to 3 years.

So, should I adopt an FIV-positive cat?

That depends. The downside is that the cat will probably have a shorter lifespan and you may have extra vet bills along the way. Of course, if you and your vet know the cat is FIV-positive, you'll probably have a different approach to vet care that can minimize the extra expense by avoiding treatments that may be less effective and by knowing when the battle is lost.

If that sounds like a raw deal, look at it from the cat's perspective. Not only does it have a shortened life expectancy, it is also facing an uphill battle to find a forever home. Few people want to make the emotional and financial investment in a pet that could turn out to die young. Hopefully the information here can make that a few more.

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) Facts

Also, consider that a "healthy" cat never comes with a "no sickness" guarantee. FIV-negative cats can encounter numerous health issues that require expensive vet care or cause death at a young age. The bottom line is when adopting any pet, with known medical problems or not, there is always the possibility of health issues at any point in their life.

A last piece of advice ...

Unfortunately, not all misinformation about FIV is only in the general public. There are quite a few vets who aren't up-to-date on FIV.

Some vets will advise euthanizing any cat that tests positive for FIV. This is absolutely not necessary. A cat with FIV can live a long life.

Some vets will advise to never keep FIV-positive cats in a house with FIV-negative cats. In reality, the risk of transmission is minimal if the cats aren't fighting viciously. They can sleep together, groom each other, share food and water bowls, toys, and litter boxes.

If your vet scares you about FIV, take a deep breath and visit these websites to read more about FIV ...

[Best Friends](#)

[Alley Cat](#)

[The ASPCA](#)