

FIV info sheet

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus

Q. What is FIV?

A. FIV is a virus that can infect CATS only (ie not humans or dogs). The virus can cause suppression of the immune system of cats – making them susceptible to other infectious diseases. In this way, it is similar to HIV in humans. FIV can occasionally cause a feline AIDS syndrome, too, where the individual cat becomes very unwell.

Q. How does a cat get FIV?

A. FIV is spread by “biting & fighting” – from an FIV positive cat to another. It is rarely spread between cats in the same household, even if they play fight. A major source of infection is stray cats, which get in to fights. FIV does not survive long in the environment, so CATS are the source.

Q. If my cat gets FIV, what will happen to it?

A. This is hard to answer! There are still a lot of unknowns. What we do know is that on a population level, studies show FIV positive cats do NOT have a reduced life expectancy when compared to FIV negative cats.

We also know a lot of FIV positive cats live long & healthy life, apparently unaffected by their FIV.

What we also know is that some individual cats DO become affected by their FIV, become sick, & may even die as a result of their infection.

What we do NOT know is what makes one individual cat stay well, while another can become sick from their FIV.

We do not know just “how important” FIV – that is, what role it plays in health & illness in the pet cat population.

There is no treatment for FIV.

Q. Can I do anything to prevent my cat from getting FIV?

A. By far the most effective means of FIV prevention is to prevent fighting between cats. Keeping your cat indoors, or in an enclosed cat run, means FIV is not a risk.

There is an FIV vaccine available in Australia – but unfortunately it's not as simple as that! Some important points to think about:

- There is limited research on FIV in Australia. This means the vaccine is based on strains of FIV in other countries, like the UK & the US. In these countries, the vaccine is reported at being 80% effective in preventing FIV infection. We are not sure just how efficacious the FIV vaccine is for our cats here in Australia.
- If a cat receives the FIV vaccine, it interferes with our diagnostic tests that aim to detect FIV infection in a cat. This means that on our test in the vet clinic (ie 'in-house' testing), a cat might show up as being "positive" for FIV. This is because a cat's immune system produces antibodies against the vaccine (which is normal), but our test cannot tell the difference between this & TRUE antibodies (that the body produces against a real FIV infection). There is another test (that we have to send away to a laboratory), which can tell the difference between a vaccinated cat & a truly infected cat. ... So you can see it's not always black & white with FIV!
- There is some risk with all vaccinations, not just the FIV vaccine. These include 'vaccination reactions' – where individual cats respond poorly, developing allergic reactions, or fevers. There is also a very small risk of developing a sarcoma (a type of tumour) at the site of the injection.

Q. So should I vaccinate my cat against FIV, or not?!

A. Again, that's a hard one to answer! There is no real 'right or wrong', & a decision to vaccinate each individual cat needs to be based on discussion & thought. For example, if your cat is indoor or outdoor.

The AVA (Australian Veterinary Association) classes the FIV vaccine as 'non core'.

As an individual cat owner, we recommend you read the above information & discuss any queries with your vet, to make a decision on vaccinating your cat for FIV or not.

If you decide to vaccinate, your vet may encourage FIV testing beforehand – to first ensure your cat is truly FIV negative.

The initial course is x3 FIV vaccinations, each given 2-4 weeks apart. It is then an annual vaccine.

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