

## Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV)

### A much misunderstood common cat virus

A number of FIV cats in the Catwork sanctuary, some of which have been there for several years are, in general terms, both healthy and happy and living a full (but protected) life.

FIV is a much misunderstood virus, which leads to many otherwise healthy cats being euthanized unnecessarily. The FIV virus reduces a cat's immune system, slowly (over several years), and this can leave it more vulnerable to other feline infections... that is all — in itself FIV is not life threatening.

### FIV CANNOT be transmitted to humans

What is often misunderstood, is that a cat with FIV will usually have a strong immune system for several years after infection, it is only with time, that the effects of the virus may start to show, and even then, most infections can be handled by appropriate medications.

The FIV cats that do suffer, are those that are long-term strays, who have survived on a poor diet and probably been involved in fights, with subsequent injuries going untreated - this is the scenario that leads to the suffering that is wrongly thought to be common to all FIVs.

In our experience, FIV positive cats can have, and deserve to have, a long and healthy life. They need careful attention to their general health and diet, but this is no more than any cat should receive. A properly cared for FIV cat need not have a shortened life expectancy. The effectiveness of all cats' immune systems reduce with age. Not many would recommend euthanasia just because a cat is getting elderly, so why so with FIV?

The main problem is that the virus can be transmitted to other cats (only cats - no other species). In the vast majority of cases, it is transmitted through biting. Cats fight for three main reasons: food, territory and mating. By providing a regular food supply and neutering, the need to fight is dramatically reduced, making the transmission of FIV far less likely. We believe that euthanasia of FIV cats is a vast over reaction.

There are many unidentified FIV cats everywhere, and most cats will come in contact with ones carrying the virus at some point, but, without fighting, there is no reason for them to become infected.

Eradicating the virus is not currently a realistic objective; and, putting to sleep a few individuals, identified with the virus but otherwise healthy, seems to us to be a futile reaction.

### Correcting some of the basic misconceptions about FIV:

- FIV is not in itself a life-threatening disease
- FIV is not 'Cataids'
- FIV does not necessarily shorten life expectancy.
- FIV cannot be transferred to other species (animal or human)

FIV is a virus that affects the cat's immune system, it acts very slowly, and it is often several years before the cat shows any signs of a damaged immune system, — many never suffer at all!

FIV can make a cat more susceptible to other infections, which means they need care and protection.

It is like when humans are 'one degree under'. When 'run-down' we tend to pick up colds and suffer from minor sores, mouth ulcers etc, more so than when in top condition. It can be the same with FIV cats if they are not cared for.

In any animal (and human), their immune response varies in effectiveness from time to time depending on their general health. When we get run-down what do we do? — We take a tonic, get more sleep, have better

food, take a holiday, we then regain our strength. The same is true of FIV positive cats — with good care, good food, and security, and preventing stressful circumstances, they seem to recover from most secondary infections just like non-FIV cats.

The FIV cats that have problems are the strays who have no one looking after them — these cats can fall prey to all the other infections around, usually brought about through fighting for food, territory or females, and without treatment, these infections can escalate. It is mostly the unneutered toms that fight, and therefore pick up and spread the virus. When one of these cats gets captured and taken to a vet, suffering from all manner of secondary infections, it is often too late. These cats are the ones that have led to the undeserved fear about FIV. It is the nature of a vet's work, that they will see many more ill cats than healthy ones, whereas in fact, there are very many more healthy FIV cats than ill ones. They just don't need to see the vet! Take a look at the photo of one of our FIV cats in our sanctuary (on the next page) and decide for yourself whether he looks healthy or not — most have no need to see a vet from one end of the year to another.

Visitors to the Catwork sanctuary often express surprise "We expected to see loads of ill cats, but they all look so happy and healthy!" — Yes, that's because they are!

**FIV is not the terrible thing it is made out to be, it is no more than a weakness!**

### **FIV in Perspective**

FIV is often assumed to be the cause of all ailments that an FIV+ cat suffers; we feel that this is a misrepresentation of the facts.

FIV is fundamentally a problem of the immune system, the virus attaches itself to certain immune system cells which, in theory at least, reduces their efficiency. I say "in theory at least" as it is almost impossible to determine just how much influence FIV has compared with other things which affect the cat's immune system.

### **What affects the immune system?**

There are many things which affect the immune system, and FIV is just one of them; others, in our view, are far more important and have a greater effect.

There are six main groups of things, which affect the immune system:

1. Nutrition - protein, vitamins, minerals, antioxidants - without them the immune system will suffer
2. Toxins - in food (coloring, preservatives etc), in water (chemical cleansers and other residues), in the air (recirculated air, unnatural deodorants, chemicals etc)
3. Age - as a cat ages, the immune system becomes less efficient
4. Physical stress - infections, injuries
5. Emotional stress - noise, fear of people and other animals, restricted movements, natural pheromones etc.
6. Viruses - FIV, FeLV, others (see physical stress)

### **Can we measure the state of the immune system?**

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There is no simple measurement of the state of the immune system, so you can't simply find out what is its strength. There are tests that can give broad indications, but not the whole picture. Even if there was a single immune system test, it would only be valid for the time it was taken, and the situation can change quickly — in other words, if the cat is fighting an infection, there would be different readings from when the cat is free of infections. The immune system is not a constant - it is in a constant state of change.

There are tests for FIV, that can give an indication of how much virus is in the body, but it will not give information as to just how it is affecting the body. Any correlation with levels in a general blood test is not necessarily directly linked, so no simple measurements of FIV effects can be made.

All FIVs are not the same

FIV cats are often spoken of as if they are all the same — nothing could be further from the truth!

There is a common acronym: ECID (Every Cat Is Different) — this is also true of FIV cats. It is not possible to group all FIVs as if they are the same, they will all come from different backgrounds, have different metabolisms, different temperaments and different general states of health. Much will depend on where they come from and their life in formative early years.

Because FIV is a virus that is mainly spread by the stray population, particularly stray unneutered males, the categories of FIV cats can be broadly divided into:

- long-term strays / ferals; ill or not
- general strays (possibly short-term); ill or not
- domestic (victims)

These are exactly the same categories for cats that are not FIV, who would have the same causes of a poor immune system.

### **Long-term stray**

The circumstances from birth have a major influence on their state of health. If a cat was born to a stray mother who probably was living on a poor diet and was therefore likely to be in poor health herself, then the kitten would have a very poor start and would probably also have a very poor diet in the formative months — this would inevitably have an affect on the development of the immune system in the first place, so it would be disadvantaged from the start, and be the most likely to have health problems and probably a shortened life expectancy — regardless of any FIV status.

These cats probably never have a strong immune system, and are also most likely to be in contact with multiple viruses, so it would be expected that they would be seen to be in a poor state of health if rescued — if tested and found to be FIV, the tendency would be to blame the FIV for the state of health, whereas in reality the fact that they may also have FIV has very little to do with their general state, FIV is more a result of the circumstances than a cause of the ill health. The cat would have been in poor health even if not FIV.

### **Short-term stray**

Some cats may have become a stray in adulthood (for all the reasons well known to rescue organizations), these would probably have had a much better start in life and have developed a reasonable immune system before adulthood. However, becoming a stray as an adult, it is likely to have a period of extremely poor diet or even semi-starvation, which in itself will take its toll on the immune system. This cat is also likely to come in contact with common infections and possible injuries as a stray; these circumstances will take their toll on the immune system, weakening it more. If the cat then falls prey to fighting FIV, the virus will be added to its problems, but is not likely to have been the cause of them. Again, these types of cats, if rescued and tested positive for FIV will add to the false impression that FIV cats are in poor health — whereas in reality it is the stray cat in poor health that is most susceptible to becoming FIV positive (again, FIV is the result not the cause).



Patrick came to us in a very poor state, very little fur on his back, and half starved. He tested positive for FIV and, with his other problems, stood little chance with the normally accepted way to deal with such cats.



After initial treatment, much TLC and recuperation, Patrick improved, and is now living a happy life in our enclosed FIV adventure garden with his five friends; he has not needed to see a vet at all (apart from his regular vaccinations that any cat should have).

Because these cats have the benefit of an early healthy immune system, they are the most likely to recover once rescued, to regain their original strength, and continue to live a long and healthy life if cared for — these are the main types of rescued cats that are so often needlessly put down simply because of the FIV.

## **Domestic**

The final broad category is the normal domestic cat in a home, who comes across a stray FIV cat looking for food and territory. This stray then fights the domestic, passing on the FIV. These domestic cats are most likely to have a very strong and healthy immune system, which continues into old age — in the vast majority of cases, the FIV probably has no real effect on them at all.

**So, I hope you can see that the fear that cats have a damaged immune system because of FIV is an over simplified, and broadly inaccurate representation of the facts.**

*The previous article was excerpted and reprinted from the Catwork web site. Catwork is a small sanctuary organization helping cats that others seem to shun.*

*For more complete information on the sanctuary go to [www.catwork.com](http://www.catwork.com)*

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Due to the high numbers of cats in rescue, it is a sad fact that those that are not young, fit and attractive, can prove slow to be homed. Tragically, this can lead to some of these cats being put to sleep. We started Catwork from the premise that, 'being difficult to home' should never be a reason for ending a cat's life.

There are many reasons that may cause an individual cat to be 'selected' to be put to sleep: They may simply be old, or have some behavioral problems, or have one of the fairly common cat viruses which are widely misunderstood and which raise unwarranted opinions and even fear!

We started by helping those cats that came our way by creating a small sanctuary where they can live and be cared for, for the remainder of their lives.

Unfortunately, being very small, we quickly became full, but continued to hear of more and more cats that were under threat of being put to sleep, in our view, unnecessarily.

We felt, therefore, that the best we could do to help more cats than those we could directly take in, was to help others to care for them, through providing information, advice and what support we can, where we can.

We are not vets or scientists, but, since starting Catwork in 1996, have gained quite a bit of hands-on experience. We wish to be able to pass on anything we know, and encourage others NOT to give up on these cats just because they may be 'inconvenient'!

We believe that the larger, national organizations ought to be providing facilities for the more difficult cases, and not simply disposing of the problems.