FELINE IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS (AIDS VIRUS IN CATS)

What is Feline Immunodeficiency virus?

Feline Immunodeficiency virus (FIV) also called Aids virus in cats, is, along with the Feline leukemia virus (FeLV), among the most common infectious diseases in cats. FIV suppresses the immune system and results in chronic inflammatory condition such as neoplasia and infections.

What are the symptoms associated with the disease?

Signs of infection include gum disease, vomiting, diarrhea, weight loss, decreased appetite, lethargy, skin abscesses, anemia, lymphoma (type of cancer), ocular disorders, chronic inflammatory conditions and susceptibility to secondary infections that are resistant to standard treatments.

How the virus is transmitted?

FIV is transmitted through direct contact with an infected cat by a bite wound that occur during fighting. There are other means of spreading the virus but they are less common. Mother cats cannot readily infect their kittens except in the initial stages of her infection. FIV can be transmitted sexually. Casual contact such as sharing food bowls or snuggling is unlikely to transmit the virus.

How can we diagnose the infection?

A test kit is used to diagnose the infection (SNAP Combo). A small amount of blood is first collected. At the Vaudreuil Veterinary Clinic, the test is performed in house. The test detects the circulating viral antibodies in the blood. The result is obtained after a few minutes. The test also detects infection with the Feline leukemia virus, another common feline virus. Once a screening test identifies a cat as positive, the next step is a follow-up confirming test called a Western Blot. Once this test is positive, the cat is considered to be truly infected. It is important to understand that the test detect the infection and not the disease itself.

Why cats should be tested for FIV?

Although vaccine is available for FIV viruses, identification and segregation of infected cats, which is separating infected cats that are likely to fight from non-infected cats is considered to be the single most effective method for preventing new infections with FIV. This is why FIV positive cats should not be allow to roam outside. Isolation of a FIV positive cat is not necessary in a stable household unless the FIV positive cat is likely to fight with the other residents.
When cats should be tested for the FIV virus?

The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) recommends that all cats should be tested for FIV as well as for the Feline leukemia virus (FeLV) at appropriate intervals based on individual risk assessments. This includes:

- **testing at the time of acquisition**
  - Even cats that are not expected to live with other cats should be tested for several reasons, including the impact on their health, the possibility of other cats joining the household, and the possibility that cats confined indoors may escape and be exposed to other cats.
  - Tests should be performed at adoption, and negative cats should be retested a minimum of 60 days later.

- **following exposure to an infected cat or a cat of unknown infection status, particularly via a bite wound**
  - After an exposure with a cat that is infected or of unknown status (e.g., stray cat), especially if contact was through a bite, disease’s lengthy incubation period may cause an infected cat to test negative for some time after exposure. Then the cat should be retested six weeks after possible exposure.

- **prior to vaccination against FIV vaccine**
- **prior to entering group housing**
  - Affected cats not yet showing signs of illness may shed the virus and be infective to other cats. This is why it is not recommended to bring a new cat into your household without tested.

- **when cats become sick.**
- **once a year for cats going outside**

If my cat tests positive and become sick, what are the treatments?

FIV positive cats can remain apparently healthy for months or even years following infection. Ultimately, FIV is suppressive to the immune system, so once signs begin, they are difficult to impossible to treat successfully.

Can we prevent the infection?

Spaying and neutering cats, testing, client reminder programs, and pet owner educational efforts can help contain the spread of the FIV virus.

Feline immunodeficiency virus vaccines should be considered as noncore vaccines, with use restricted to cats at high risk of infection (e.g., outdoor cats that fight) and cats not infected living with FIV-infected cats. Clients should be informed that vaccinated cats will develop false-positive FIV test results, and the decision to vaccinate should be reached only after careful consideration of this implication. If the decision falls in favor of vaccination, cats should test negative immediately prior to vaccination.

**Again, it is highly recommended that cats be tested for FIV and FeLV before vaccination.**

Ask your veterinarian about FIV and FeLV testing.

Reference:

Par C. Senay, May 2013