

Feline February

This month we are focusing on our kitty companions! We'll be discussing two prevalent infections that every cat should be screened for- feline immunodeficiency virus (known as FIV) and feline leukemia virus (known as FeLV).

FIV is a viral infection that suppresses the cat's immune system. It's spread most commonly by close contact, often from bite wounds. It can also spread from mother to kittens through the placenta. Signs can be quite variable, ranging from no signs at all, to fever, lethargy, secondary infections and enlarged lymph nodes. Cats can have what is known as an "asymptomatic phase" that lasts from months to years, in which they show no signs of disease. Unfortunately, there's no treatment to eliminate this viral infection. Healthy FIV-positive cats don't require treatment, but those with clinical signs can only be treated supportively with no hope of cure.

FeLV is also a viral infection that targets the immune system. It's capable of leading to various bone marrow disorders and cancer, in addition to generalized lethargy and secondary infections. This virus is spread in a similar fashion to FIV, being shed in bodily fluids such as saliva, nasal secretions, urine and milk. As with FIV, some cats have no clinical signs; however, other infected cats can develop cancers affecting the lymph nodes, bone marrow and other organs. There's no treatment for FeLV either, and the only "treatment" for sick patients is merely supportive care just like FIV.

Even though FeLV or FIV-positive cats can be healthy, they're still capable of transmitting the virus to other cats. Therefore, it's recommended that all cats be tested for FIV and FeLV! Most veterinary clinics offer this testing and it only requires a small sample of blood. It may be recommended to perform other laboratory tests if your cat is showing symptoms of disease, such as additional blood work to assess organ function and x-rays to screen for cancer.

Cats with either of these diseases should be kept indoors so that other non-infected cats aren't exposed to these viruses. It's also recommended that these patients have semi-annual exams (at minimum) to ensure they're not showing any gradual decline in health. There's no vaccination for FIV, however there is one for FeLV. The FeLV vaccine is recommended for all kittens, and adult cats that have an active outdoor lifestyle where they may encounter stray felines that could carry the disease. Vaccination should only be performed once testing has ruled out that the kitten or cat has FeLV. If they do have FeLV, the FeLV vaccine provides no benefit to them.

Cats with FIV or FeLV can live a normal, healthy life for many years. In the later stages of disease however, prognosis can be poor for maintaining a comfortable quality of life. The best thing you can do for your feline pet, if you've not already done so, is to ensure your pet is not silently suffering from either of these diseases by having them tested through your local veterinary office.