

Living With FIV

Cats with FIV, the feline equivalent of the human AIDS virus, can still live full, happy lives.

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Although there is no licensed or approved treatment shown to reverse well-established FIV infections, a study described in the April 2003 issue of *Antimicrobial Agents and Chemotherapy* (the official journal of the American Society of Microbiology) has generated some excitement. In that study, scientists from the Parker Hughes Cancer Center in Roseville, Minn., reported the successful treatment of cats chronically infected with FIV using a drug called stampidine. Cats in the study showed a drop in viral load, that is, less of the virus was found in the bloodstream when treated with the drug. At higher doses, stampidine eliminated FIV in cats with no side effects. No decision has yet been made as to whether this drug will be made available for cats.

Prevention All cat owners should keep their cats indoors, especially those with FIV-positive cats, to prevent the cat from spreading the disease and to prevent their immunosuppressed cat from being exposed to infectious agents carried by other animals. Healthy cats should also stay indoors to avoid encounters with FIV-infected cats. If for any reason a cat goes outdoors it should be spayed or neutered to limit the spread of FIV by decreasing fighting and roaming behavior.

In March 2003, the U.S. Department of Agriculture approved the first FIV vaccine. Available to veterinarians across the country, the vaccine is said to provide reasonable immunity against FIV infection, but its use remains controversial.

The current FIV test is designed to detect antibodies against the virus. Cats vaccinated against FIV develop antibodies against the virus. Therefore, if a cat of unknown vaccination status tests positive on an in-clinic FIV test, it is currently impossible to distinguish whether the antibodies in its bloodstream developed in response to previous vaccination, or in response to natural infection. Until a test is developed that can distinguish between vaccine-induced antibodies and antibodies that arose because of natural infection, veterinarians must evaluate the potential risks and benefits of vaccination based on each individual cat's lifestyle and circumstance.

With proper care, FIV-infected cats can live many years, and in fact may die from disorders common to elderly cats, and not from illnesses related to their FIV infection. Quality of life for FIV-positive cats is generally very good. Just ask Buster.