

Living With FIV

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

Arnold Plotnick, DVM

All things considered, he is doing amazingly well, I told Barry Axtell and Paul Riedel, owners of 12-year-old Buster, a sweet-tempered, black-and-white shorthaired cat. Buster visits my cat hospital twice a year, and he always looks fit and healthy. Although this may be expected for most well-fed housecats, Busters circumstance is special; he's FIV-positive.

Feline AIDS

The feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) was isolated in 1986 from a cat with clinical symptoms that were strikingly similar to those seen in humans with acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), the disease associated with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection.

Cats acquire the FIV infection when bitten by another cat that is infected with the virus. Free-roaming, non-neutered male cats are at higher risk because of their territoriality and increased propensity for fighting. Although casual, non-aggressive contact typically does not transmit the virus, one study shows that it is possible to transmit it without bite wounds within a multi-cat household.

While FIV is similar to HIV and results in a feline disease similar to AIDS in humans, FIV infections are restricted solely to cats, says Lisa Conti DVM, dipl. of the American College of Veterinary Preventive Medicine (ACVPM), accredited by the Council on Education for Public Health (CEHP), and director of the Division of Environmental Health for Florida. Nevertheless, from a public-health standpoint, immunocompromised people should not be exposed to cats with FIV infections because of other communicable infections these cats may have.

Disease Stages

FIV progressively disrupts normal immune function. Cats exposed to the virus may go through three stages of infection: the acute stage, lasting three to six months; the subclinical stage, lasting months to years; and the chronic stage (the feline AIDS stage), which may also last months or years.

Cats in the first (acute) stage of infection experience mild disease (fever, lymph node enlargement, intermittent lethargy and decreased appetite). Most cats recover with no treatment, and rarely receive veterinary care in this stage.