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## Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV)

Feline immunodeficiency virus is a retrovirus in the lentivirus subfamily. FIV results in suppression of the cat's immune system, compromising the cat's ability to fight off infection. FIV-infected cats are vulnerable to a wide array of bacteria, viruses, and fungi that are normally harmless to an uninfected cat. The primary mode of transmission is through bite wounds. Since spayed and neutered cats fight much less than intact cats, neutered FIV-positive cats can generally live safely with uninfected cats both in and outdoors. The risk of transmitting the virus to another cat is very low. It is important to note that kittens are unlikely to acquire FIV from an infected mother, either through in utero transmission, maternal grooming, or nursing.

### Progression of the Virus

After initial infection, the virus spreads to the cat's lymph nodes, causing them to become enlarged. The cat may develop a fever that lasts for several days and may experience a drop in white blood cell count. During the second stage of infection, the cat can be completely asymptomatic and remain healthy for several years. During the third, chronic stage, the cat begins to develop signs of immunodeficiency and may suffer from a number of secondary conditions and opportunistic infections, including stomatitis, ocular inflammation, cancer, and respiratory tract infections. FIV-infected cats can also develop persistent intestinal and urinary tract infections, neurological problems, kidney disease, and tumors.

A diagnosis of FIV is not necessarily cause for alarm. Since the virus has a relatively long incubation period, a cat that tests FIV-positive may live happily and healthily for several years. [Learn more about Coo, Alley Cat Allies' FIV-positive office cat.](#)

### Against FIV Testing

Because of the reasons stated previously—including low rate of disease, low likelihood of transmission, and the costs of testing—Alley Cat Allies does not support testing feral cats for FIV.

Another reason is that FIV tests can provide inconclusive results:

- Kittens that test positive are not necessarily infected. If a kitten tests positive, the test may be detecting antibodies passed from an infected mother to the kitten through colostrum (an antibody-rich fluid secreted by nursing mothers). Positive kittens under six months of age should be retested between eight to 12 months of age, when any antibodies obtained from the mother cat will have disappeared.
- In 2002, the first FIV vaccine was approved. Fel-O-Vax FIV results in antibodies that are indistinguishable from those that occur with natural infection. Therefore, tests have trouble distinguishing between which cats are infected with FIV, vaccinated against FIV, or both infected and vaccinated.

### Care and Treatment

Although there is no cure for FIV, if you do encounter a feral cat who has FIV, you can treat or at least alleviate the secondary conditions and opportunistic infections associated with the virus. Good supportive care can improve the quality of an FIV-infected cat's life. Holistic veterinarians recommend nutritional support, herbs, vitamins, homeopathy, and other alternative treatments such as acupuncture to help strengthen a cat's impaired immune system. For more information about holistic treatments, see *The New Natural Cat*, by Anitra Frazier (also provides information about treating FeLV) and *Dr. Pitcairn's Complete Guide to Natural Health for Dogs and Cats* by Richard Pitcairn, DVM, and Susan Hubble Pitcairn.

[Read more complete information about selection and interpretation of FeLV and FIV tests and management suggestions for infected cats from the American Association of Feline Practitioners.](#)



### Step-by-Step

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### Tools

[Learn more about FeLV »](#)

[Learn more about Coo, Alley Cat Allies' FIV-positive office cat »](#)