



Georgia

## **Living with FIV – A Happy and Healthy Reality**

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Giving a FIV positive kitty all nine lives

*by Barbara J. Koll, Best Friends Network*

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) is a commonly misunderstood cat disease. The disease was first discovered in the mid 1980s and was thought to be similar to feline leukemia and was also thought to be an automatic death sentence for cats. In fact, many veterinarians recommended euthanasia for cats diagnosed with FIV. FIV is commonly referred to as a “slow virus” – a lentivirus. It progresses very slowly and gradually affects the cat’s immune system.

Although many cat care specialists have changed their views on FIV, a positive result from a FIV test still can be devastating to a cat owner. However, in many cases, FIV causes a cat minimal difficulty and they can live up to 15 healthy years after a positive diagnosis. As long as they are not exposed to diseases that their immune system cannot handle, they can live perfectly normal lives. FIV-positive cats may be more susceptible to various infections of the skin, respiratory system, urinary tract, eyes, ears and mouth.

The best way of controlling FIV is by screening for the presence of the FIV antibodies which are usually present three to six weeks after infection. Any positive screening test should be confirmed through the “western blot” test. At risk cats (those who go outdoors) should be tested annually. Cats should be tested before bringing them into a new home. Kittens tested prior to six months of age should be retested after six months because they can show “false positive” antibodies from their mother.

It is estimated that 2% of all cats in the United States are infected with FIV. Male cats are twice as likely to become infected with FIV as female cats. Free-roaming cats are more likely to be infected because they are more susceptible to bite wounds. Biting is one of the primary sources of spreading the virus. If cats do not fight, the disease is unlikely to be transmitted within the household. FIV is not transmitted by casual contact and therefore it is unlikely that the FIV will be spread by drinking or eating out of the same dishes, by sharing litter boxes, or by mutual grooming or snuggling. The best way to prevent

infection is to ensure that a cat stays indoors thereby eliminating the possibility of contact with FIV-positive cats.

A cat owner whose cat is diagnosed as FIV-positive should work very closely with their veterinarian to design an appropriate health care management program. They need at least annual veterinary exams and any medical problems must be addressed immediately to ensure that they live long lives. FIV-positive cats should be kept up-to-date on their routine vaccinations and should receive a high-quality diet. Even flea control is important for FIV-positive cats because fleas can transmit many other types of diseases. Flea bites themselves can become infected and become a cause for concern.

If you already have a cat with FIV, consider adding a second FIV-positive cat to your home. If you are considering adopting a cat, consider an FIV positive cat – this helps the rescue organization involved because it is often difficult for these kitties to find loving homes.

FIV-positive cats can be safely kept with FIV-negative cats so long as the cats get along well together. When bringing a FIV-positive cat into your home with cats who are not FIV-positive, be careful and introduce the new cat slowly into your household to make sure the cats get along well together. There is no reason that FIV-positive cats cannot be blended into a home with FIV-negative cats with careful monitoring of the cats' behavior and minimizing the likelihood of fights.

The life span of FIV-positive cats can be quite long and they have much love to give. A positive diagnosis should not be a stigma that prevents a loving cat from finding a loving home. There should be no fear about this virus. The truth about FIV must be spread so that these healthy cats can find loving homes.

**FIV Facts:** (from [FIV: Catching a Bad Case of Rumors](#))

- The Feline Immuno-deficiency Virus is a slow virus that affects a cat's immune system over a period of years.
- FIV is a cat-only disease and cannot be spread to humans or other non-felines.
- FIV cats most often live long, healthy, and relatively normal lives with no symptoms at all.
- FIV is not easily passed between cats. It cannot be spread casually - like in litter boxes, water and food bowls, or when snuggling and playing. It is rarely spread from a mother to her kittens.
- The virus can be spread through blood transfusions, badly infected gums, or serious, penetrating bite wounds. (Bite wounds of this kind are extremely rare, except in free-roaming, unneutered tomcats.)
- A neutered cat, in a home, is extremely unlikely to infect other cats, if properly introduced.
- Many vets are not educated about FIV since the virus was only discovered 15 years ago.
- FIV-positive cats should be kept as healthy as possible. Keep them indoors and free from stress, feed them a high-quality diet, keep and treat any secondary problems as soon as they arise.

*Above photo is Loverboy - a survivor of the Pahrump Kitty Rescue. Loverboy is one of the many FIV positive cats living at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary. Photo by Mark Morgan.*

Comments

Tuesday, July 8, 2008 at 12:10 am

posted by: [mycatranch](#)

We've rescued several FIV+ cats. We have been able to find loving homes for a few of them. The rest we were able to get into sanctuaries for FIV+ cats.

Friday, April 11, 2008 at 11:05 pm

posted by: [gyatso1](#)

Great story--and very true. I've been rescuing FIV babies for around eight years. I have several of them now, and the all enjoy a wonderful, full life with my non positive cats and dogs. The one FIV baby of

mine that has crossed the bridge did so because of kidney failure at the ripe old age of 17. FIV babies make wonderful additions to a family, and hopefully more people are becoming educated about the disease so they don't fear bringing these great cats into their homes.