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FIV Information Handout

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) is a virus that infects some cats; most typically intact male cats that fight outside with other cats. The infection is considered to be present for the life of the animal and can cause the immune system to be weaker than that of a non-infected cat. While this is similar to the HIV virus of humans, FIV is a cat-only virus and cannot be passed to humans or other species of animals.

FIV is a widely misunderstood condition. Many people think that it's easily spread, makes all infected cats very sick, and that they will die young. This is far from the truth! FIV positive cats usually enjoy a good quality of life for many years, often living normal life spans if well cared for. However, a small percentage of these cats could progress into AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) - a full immune system failure that causes life threatening infections or cancers and leads to death. This is rare in pet cats.

When a cat tests positive for FIV, it means their body has made antibodies to the virus - meaning they have been exposed to it or vaccinated against it (which causes their test to turn positive and why this vaccination is no longer recommended). We equate a positive FIV test result with ongoing infection but it is not necessarily definitive of that. Some cats that initially test positive may be found to be negative at some time in the future - either the first test was a false result or their body was exposed to the virus but did not become permanently infected by it.

FIV is not spread through casual contact such as shared food/water/litter, mutual grooming, or playing. Transmission is caused by direct saliva introduction into the blood stream - in other words, a bite from an infected cat through the skin into the blood stream of another cat. Spaying and neutering cats greatly reduces the incidence of cat fights and thus reduces the chance of a bite that could transmit FIV.

We recommend FIV positive cats remain as indoor-only pets for their own protection as well as that of the other cats outside. This prevents viral spread to other local cats, keeps FIV positive cats healthier with no exposure to parasites and viruses (which can cause any cat to become sick, but may cause severe illness in FIV positive cats), and prevents the FIV cat from developing bad infections from other cats or animals injuring them. FIV positive cats can live with FIV negative cats with little risk of transmission as long as the cats maintain a friendly, peaceful acquaintance with no biting that breaks the skin. Non-play, aggressive bites are most likely to occur when first introducing cats to each other, which in turn increases the risk of transmission during the initial introduction period. Well-planned, carefully supervised introductions done only with cats known to be friendly to other cats can minimize this risk.

FIV positive cats can live as long and healthy a life as non-infected cats. This does not mean they will never become ill; they are, after all, immunocompromised, so illnesses are easier to develop and harder to fight off. If FIV positive cats become ill, they are generally treated earlier, longer, and more aggressively than non-infected cats. These cats may be put on antibiotics more frequently than non-infected cats when they become ill. They may need more frequent dental cleanings due to the tendency to develop gingivitis and tooth root abscesses more easily than non-infected cats. Stress may cause these cats to become ill more easily, so owners should take reasonable steps to reduce potential stressors. Stressors to cats are things that cause their environment to change such as moving, remodeling, lots of visitors/parties/house guests (if the cat is shy), loud chaotic households, and frequently being left by their owners for days at a time. They also have the same regular needs as any other cat: high-quality nutrition, a clean, low-stress environment, regular veterinary visits and vaccinations, and lots of love.

Despite numerous studies supporting the above information, it is often more difficult for FIV positive cats to find their forever homes, largely because of the stigmas associated with being infected with FIV. At NCAL, we aim to help adopters and our community become educated and well-informed about FIV so that we can save these cats, too.

Please consider opening up your heart and home to an FIV positive cat!