

I bought two Rag Doll kittens from a breeder almost two years ago. One of them is healthy but the other is losing weight and not eating. My veterinarian thinks she might have FIP. What is FIP and should I be worried about the other kitten having it?

I'm sorry to hear about your cat. As you know by now, FIP or Feline Infectious Peritonitis is a serious disease that usually occurs in young cats between 6 months and 2 years of age. Purebred cats in multi cat households seem to be most susceptible. FIP is caused by a common feline coronavirus (FCoV) that mutates spontaneously from a benign virus to an aggressive, lethal one in affected cats.

The coronavirus is passed from cat to cat by eating feces of another infected cats or through saliva during normal grooming. The virus can also be transmitted from the mother before the kittens are born. Studies have shown that no two cats have exactly the same virus. This is important because spread from cat to cat is not the critical factor in the development of FIP. Instead, it is the ability of the virus to mutate inside the cat and the cat's immune system's response that will determine whether a coronavirus infection remains quiet or develops into FIP. There are two forms of FIP, dry and wet. The signs that you see will vary greatly between the two forms but unfortunately, the treatment options and outcome are both poor. Most cats with FIP are seen by a veterinarian for weight loss, poor appetite and lethargy. In cats with the wet form of FIP, they may have a distended abdomen which is full of fluid. In addition, on examination, there may be fluid in the in the chest and quiet heart sounds. The dry form may include neurologic changes, eye abnormalities, lesions or yellowing of the skin, or abdominal masses.

Diagnosing FIP can be very challenging. The most reliable test is a biopsy of affected tissue. Without a biopsy, your veterinarian must use a cat's history, clinical signs and changes in blood work to make a diagnosis. A feline coronavirus antibody titer can be run but a positive titer will only represent exposure to a coronavirus, not specifically FIP.

At this time, FIP is an incurable disease so the goal of treatment is supportive care. Antiviral and immunomodulating medications are options. Cats with the wet form of the disease generally die within 2 months of showing signs of illness. Cats with the dry form tend to live longer after showing symptoms, but despite treatment unfortunately, succumb to the disease.

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