

We adopted a cat from the shelter and she has FIV. Can we get the virus? Can we adopt another cat in the future?

FIV, Feline Immunodeficiency Virus, is a virus that only affects cats and does not pose a human health risk to you or your family. The virus name and the way it acts are very similar to the human immunodeficiency virus, HIV. FIV is most commonly transmitted through bite wounds from other cats. Pregnant cats that become infected with the virus may transmit the virus to unborn kittens, although this is uncommon. Older, free-roaming outdoor male cats are at the highest risk for infection.

There are 3 stages of FIV: an acute phase, an asymptomatic phase and a terminal phase. In the acute phase, signs may last several days to weeks and consist of fever, depression, stomach upset and swollen lymph nodes. You may not see this phase in every cat. During the asymptomatic phase, the cat does not show signs of the disease and this stage may continue for years. Later stages involve secondary infections, cancer or severe weight loss. Serious oral or dental disease is common in the late stages of FIV.

Cats with seemingly minor infections that fail to improve or with significant oral disease should be tested for FIV. After a cat has been exposed to the virus, most cats will test positive within a few weeks. Some cats can take up to 6 months before they will test positive for FIV. If a kitten is born from an FIV positive mother, the kitten may test positive for up to 4 months after it is born. For this reason, we recommend retesting positive kittens at 6 months of age, as their FIV status may revert to negative.

At this time there isn't a recommended FIV vaccine and any cat you bring in to your home will be at risk for contracting the virus. Also, the stress of a new cat or injuries from a fight could cause your cat to become very ill. Treatment of FIV includes supportive care and management of related complications. Unfortunately, there is no specific antiviral therapy available. It is recommended that FIV positive cats be examined by a veterinarian every 4-6 months to allow for early intervention and detection of illnesses. Special care should also be given to treating and preventing periodontal disease.

Discuss your cat's health with your veterinarian and develop a plan for how to give your new cat the longest, healthiest life possible.

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