

The Truth About FIV and Cats

by Richard Allen, D.V.M. - Best Friends Veterinarian, Best Friends Animal Sanctuary Nov/Dec 1998 magazine

Malcolm and Simon are big fluffy neutered male cats. They love being petted and snuggling up close, or sitting in a window, sunning and snoozing. They're healthy and never miss their litter box; but, while many of their friends quickly find loving homes, Malcolm and Simon have been sitting and waiting - their chances of a home are low because of a virus in their body called FIV.

FIV stands for Feline Immunodeficiency Virus. This virus is in the same family of viruses as FeLV (Feline Leukemia Virus). They are both retroviruses. But the subfamily of FIV is different: It is a lentivirus (or "slow virus"). The other familiar lentivirus to all of us is HIV, which causes AIDS in humans. So, humans are not alone in having a virus that affects the immune system.

Humans are, in fact, relatively new to the immunodeficiency virus scene. This type of virus was present in horses, monkeys and felines long before the human version appeared on our planet. FIV is not limited to domestic (house) cats but can be found in the big cats as well. 84 percent of Serengeti lions harbor FIV and the virus has been identified in 25 species of cats around the globe from cougars in Wyoming to snow leopards in the Himalayas. It appears that felines have gradually developed the ability to live with the FIV virus for long periods of time, and that's why we should start looking at Malcolm and Simon and their friends with FIV in a new light.



Living with FIV

FIV is a cat-only disease. This immunodeficiency virus (like all immunodeficiency viruses) is very species specific - so specific, in fact, that the virus domestic cats have is different from the kind the big cats have. You cannot catch FIV from your pet.

FIV is spread between cats by bite wounds and blood transfusions. Unless your FIV kitty bites another cat, the virus cannot spread. FIV can never be spread casually. Casual includes litter boxes, water and food bowls or snuggling and playing. It is even unlikely for an FIV mother to give FIV to her kittens. So, what I am saying is

that unless Malcolm and Simon were to bite another cat (and if you met them you would know they're really not into biting anything!) they cannot spread FIV - no exception, no way.

With the truth about FIV in hand, there is no reason that Malcolm and Simon should not be in a loving home with other cats. FIV cats can live quite long and quite normal lives. Cats seem to live a long time with this virus often with no symptoms at all. Of course, there is no guarantee that an FIV cat will not develop clinical disease; but there's no guarantee that any cat won't get sick from something sooner or later!

Meanwhile, it seems to me that the life span of FIV cats is quite long and that they have a lot to give us. FIV should not be a sentence or a stigma that prevents a delightful feline from coming into your home. It's time to end the fear and misinformation about this virus and to spread the truth about FIV so that these healthy cats can find the homes and the love they deserve.

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