

Feline Panleukopenia (FP)

What is Feline Panleukopenia?

Over the years feline panleukopenia (FP) has been known by a variety of names; feline distemper, infectious enteritis, cat fever, cat typhoid, and several others.

FP is a highly contagious virus that occurs wherever there are cats. Cats at any age can get the disease. Young kittens, sick cats, and indoor cats that have not been given boosters recently are most susceptible; older cats are more likely to have acquired an immunity and, therefore, are infected less frequently.

Kittens less than 16 weeks of age may die at a rate of about 75%, and others at a rate of 50%.

Urban areas are most likely to see outbreaks of FP during the warmer months. The virus has appeared in all parts of the United States and most countries of the world.

Boarding kennels, pet shops, humane societies, animal shelters, and other areas where groups of cats are housed appear to be the main reservoirs of FP today.

Dogs are not susceptible to FP. Canine distemper is a different disease caused by another virus. Neither disease is transmissible to humans.

What does FP do?

The FP virus is passed from cat to cat by direct contact. Infection occurs when contact is made with blood, urine, fecal material, nasal secretions, and even fleas of infected cats. Bedding, cages, food dishes, and the hands or clothing of handlers may harbor and transmit the virus.

The FP virus is very stable. It is resistant to many chemicals and may remain infectious at room temperature for as long as one year. Short of raising a cat in total isolation, it is nearly impossible to prevent exposure.

FP is a complex disease. It can vary in severity from very mild to extreme. The many signs are not always typical and many owners may even believe that their cat has been poisoned or has swallowed a foreign object. Because of this fact, treatment may be delayed or neglected.

After exposure to the virus, many of the cat's cells are destroyed. This cell loss makes the cat more susceptible to other complications and bacterial infections.

How can you tell if a cat has FP?

The first signs an owner might notice are: general depression, loss of appetite, high fever, lethargy, vomiting, dehydration, and hanging over the water dish. This course of the disease may be short and



explosive. Advanced cases, when discovered, may cause death within hours. Normally, the sickness may go on for three or four days after the first elevation of body temperature.

Fever will fluctuate during the illness and abruptly fall to subnormal levels shortly before death. Other signs in later stages may be diarrhea, anemia, and persistent vomiting.

FP is so prevalent and the signs so varied that any sick cat should be taken to a veterinarian for a definite diagnosis.

How is FP treated?

The prognosis for kittens less than 8 weeks old is poor. Older cats have a greater chance of survival if adequate treatment is provided early in the course of the disease. Treatment is limited to supportive therapy to help the cat gain and retain sufficient strength to combat the virus with its own immune system. There are no antibiotics that can kill the virus.

The veterinarian will attempt to combat extreme dehydration, provide nutrients, and prevent secondary infection with antibiotics. If the cat survives for 48 hours, its chances for recovery are much better. Pregnant females that contract the disease, even in its mildest form, may give birth to kittens with severe brain damage.

Strict isolation is essential. The area where the cat is kept should be warm, free of drafts, and very clean. Plenty of "tender loving care" is very important. Cats may lose the will to live; so frequent petting, hand feeding, the cautious use of heating pads, and good nursing care by the owner is essential.

Other cats that may have been in close association with the infected cat should also be carefully examined.

What about prevention and protection?

FP is controlled in several ways. Cats that survive a natural infection usually develop sufficient, active immunity to protect them for the rest of their lives. Mild cases may go unnoticed and also produce immunity.

It is also possible for kittens to receive immunity from their mother through the transfer of antibodies. This passive immunity from the mother is temporary and its effectiveness varies in proportion to the level of antibody in the mother's body. The immunity diminishes rapidly and is not considered effective after 12 weeks of age.

Vaccines offer the safest protection. Most vaccines are made from live viruses treated to destroy their ability to cause disease. They stimulate the cat's body to produce protective antibodies against the virus to prevent infection by natural, disease-causing viruses. The vaccines are very effective, but are preventive, not curative. They must be administered before the cat is exposed and infected to be effective. Most young kittens receive their first vaccination between 6 and 12 weeks of age, or as soon as they are taken from their mother. Vaccination must be repeated annually as a booster to maintain effective immunity.

Specific vaccination schedules vary depending on many factors, such as the disease incidence in the area, age and health of the cat, etc. The pet owner should consult a veterinarian for advice on the correct schedule for each cat.

A healthy note...

Only a healthy pet is a happy companion. To assure your pet's daily well-being requires regular care and close attention to any hint of ill health. The American Veterinary Medical Association therefore suggests that you consult your veterinarian if your pet shows any of the following signs:

- Abnormal behavior, sudden viciousness, or lethargy
- Abnormal discharges from the nose, eyes, or other body openings
- Abnormal lumps, limping, or difficulty getting up or lying down
- Loss of appetite, marked weight loss or gains, or excessive water consumption
- Difficult, abnormal, or uncontrolled waste elimination
- Excessive head shaking, scratching, and licking or biting any part of the body
- Dandruff, loss of hair, open sores, and a ragged or dull coat
- Foul breath or excessive tartar deposits on their teeth

SOURCE: American Veterinary Medical Association

San Bernardino County
Animal Care & Control Program
(800) 472-5609
www.sbcounty.gov/acc

