Feline Immunodeficiency Virus

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) is a common disease in New Zealand cats. In NZ it is reported that between 7% and 30% of cats have FIV. Infection rates vary between regions (areas with a big feral cat population will have higher rates) and there are currently no statistics available for the Bay of Plenty.

***On average, that means that 1 cat out of every 13 cats in NZ has FIV!**

What is FIV?

FIV is a potentially fatal viral disease that interferes with a cat's immune system. After getting the disease, cats may remain free of symptoms for up to 10 years. However, during this time the immune system slowly deteriorates and eventually leads to cat AIDS. When this occurs, the immune system becomes too weak to fight off other infections or diseases.

***FIV and Feline AIDS cannot be caught by people – FIV only infects cats**

How do cats catch FIV?

FIV is shed in high quantities in saliva and blood, so the main way it is spread from cat to cat is by being bitten during a cat fight.

Symptoms of FIV Infection

Initial symptoms: Loss of appetite, fever, lethargy, swollen glands (lymph nodes)
As the disease progresses and the immune system stops working so well, we see symptoms such as:
Weight loss, mouth sores, chronic infections, neurological signs and cancer.

Treatment for FIV

There is no treatment or cure for a cat infected with FIV; infection is for life. However, there has been some success using a human medication, which can extend life expectancy by 18 months.
FIV infected cats need to be kept isolated from other non-infected cats. This is to prevent spread of the disease to other cats through fighting, but also to protect the FIV cat from encountering other diseases that its immune system may not be able to cope with.

How can FIV and Feline AIDS be prevented?

A vaccine (Fel-o-vax FIV vaccine) is available, which can help prevent FIV. This vaccine was developed overseas and is said to protect 60% of cats. However, the vaccines effectiveness in NZ continues to be debated.

FIV has 5 different sub-types and in NZ 70% of the FIV subtypes seen are different to that used to develop the vaccine. It is not known how much protection will be given against our

FIV population, as no studies have been done in NZ. Studies have been done in Australia and Canada and these did show the vaccine gave a good amount of cross-protection. Other ways to prevent FIV infection:

*Keeping your cat indoors or limiting exposure to outdoor cats, particularly wild cats (which have a higher chance of having FIV).

*Testing a new cat prior to joining a multi-cat household.

*Isolating FIV positive or aggressive cats from other cats.

What does the FIV Vaccination involve?

An FIV vaccination course involves 3 vaccinations, 2-4 weeks apart and then a yearly booster.

A blood test for FIV is required prior to starting the vaccination course in cats over 6 months of age, to ensure they do not have FIV. We recommend that FIV vaccinated cats are also microchipped. This ensures that if an FIV vaccinated cat went missing, it would always be known that it was FIV positive due to vaccination and not the FIV disease.

We are currently encouraging FIV testing for our feline patients, to ensure optimal health care for those patients that have contracted the disease, as well as to help prevent its spread and to build up a picture of how common the disease is in our area. In addition, we are involved in a study being conducted by Massey University into the FIV vaccine's effectiveness in NZ.