



Vaccinating your cat

Cats are commonly vaccinated against:

- **Feline infectious enteritis**

(Also known as 'feline distemper' and feline panleukopaenia.)

Transmission

Spread by the faeces and urine of infected cats, the virus can survive well in the environment. Pregnant cats can transmit the disease to their kittens in the womb. In early pregnancy this causes abortion. In late pregnancy the kittens survive, but the virus can damage the part of the brain which controls co-ordination. This results in a condition called cerebellar hypoplasia.

Symptoms

Kittens with cerebellar hypoplasia suffer from tremors and poor coordination and may also be born blind. This damage is permanent, but the kittens may go on to have otherwise healthy lives.

The virus attacks the cat's immune system, causing the white blood cell count to drop extremely low, leaving the cat unable to fight infection. Symptoms include lethargy and inappetance, fever, seizures, vomiting, diarrhoea and dehydration. Older cats are more likely to survive than kittens.

Treatment

There is no specific treatment; however fluids and medication can be given to control vomiting. And antibiotics are given to prevent the cat developing secondary infections.

- **Feline herpes virus**

(Also known as feline viral rhinotracheitis)

Transmission

The virus is spread by discharge from the nose/eyes and from saliva of an infected cat. The virus can also survive in the environment and be passed on to other cats. It is a very common cause of 'cat-flu'.

Symptoms

Seen most commonly in kittens, symptoms include, fever, sneezing, discharge from the eyes and nose, conjunctivitis and occasionally ulcers on the surface of the eye. Ulcers may also develop on the tongue. Anorexia can be a problem, especially in kittens, leading to dehydration. If a pregnant cat becomes infected this may result in abortion. Adult cats are less severely affected.

An infected cat may not show any outward sign of illness, but can act as a 'carrier' cat, passing the infection on to others.

Treatment

Treatment is mostly supportive, keeping the eyes and nose clear of discharge, antibiotics to prevent secondary bacterial infections, and eye drops if conjunctivitis is present. Anti-viral treatments have been used experimentally by some vets.

Once a cat has had feline herpes virus it is infected for life and may suffer for flare ups (in the same way people with human herpes virus get recurrent cold sores), but the first infection is usually the most severe. Flare ups may occur after stress or illness, or if the cat is immuno-suppressed e.g. with steroid treatment.



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- **Feline calicivirus**

Transmission

The virus can be spread by direct contact with affected cats, or by air-borne spread, or contamination of the environment. Cats that recover can occasionally become carriers, and able to transmit the infection to other cats.

Symptoms

Another cause of 'cat-flu'. Its symptoms include fever, inappetance, discharge from the nose/eyes and sneezing. It can also cause drooling and severe mouth ulcers. More severe strains can lead to pneumonia. Stress or illness can cause flare-ups of the virus.

Recently a new strain of the virus known as virulent systemic feline calicivirus has been seen, particularly in the USA. This causes severe epidemics of disease which causes death in over 50 per cent of cases. Initial symptoms are the same, but the cat goes on to develop swelling of the face and limbs, jaundice and organ failure.

Treatment

Treatment is supportive, bathing the cat's face, encouraging feeding with soft food, and antibiotics to prevent secondary infection. Severely affected cats with mouth ulceration may need to go on a drip and be given pain killers.

Vaccination prevents infection with some strains of feline calicivirus but not all. However, cats that do become infected generally have much milder symptoms than those that are unvaccinated.

- **Feline leukaemia virus**

Transmission

The virus is spread by saliva/nasal secretions and is thought to require close contact with an affected cat for the infection to be transmitted. This may be from fighting/bite wounds, grooming between cats, and rarely sharing of food/water bowls. It may also be transmitted from a mother cat to her kittens via her milk.

Disease is much more common in city areas where the cat population is higher, and amongst un-neutered and stray cats. Cats in multi-cat households are also more at risk.

Symptoms

Symptoms can vary, but can include poor body condition, poor coat, anorexia, recurrent infections or disease, gingivitis (inflammation of the gums), diarrhoea and jaundice. The virus infects the cat's bone marrow, which can result in leukaemia (cancer of the white blood cells) and anaemia, cats may also develop lymphoma (cancer of the lymph nodes).

Treatment

Some cats infected with the virus may clear the infection un-eventfully (40 per cent), others may remain asymptomatic carriers. Of cats that develop the disease, some develop severe lethal symptoms (30 per cent) others may survive longer but with a compromised immune system.

There is a possible association between the **feline leukaemia virus** vaccination and a type of tumour called vaccine related sarcoma. These tumours are rare, but because of this, current recommendations are that only at risk cats are given the vaccine. This would include cats in multi-cat households, breeding animals and any cats which go outdoors and are potentially coming into contact with other cats in the neighbourhood.