

Vaccinations for Cats

Most people are familiar with vaccinations for humans and their pets, and people generally have their pets vaccinated as kittens, but often they let them lapse. Here, we explain how they work and why vets continue to advise cat owners to vaccinate their cats.



When kittens are born they have some immunity against these diseases from their mothers, this comes via the placenta and then the colostrum (first milk) that the mother provides. This gives them antibodies that allow them to fight any diseases they encounter, but as time goes on this immunity wanes and the levels drop so we vaccinate them. This stimulates their own immunity to produce antibodies and the second vaccination further boosts this process providing the animal with their own protection mechanisms.

As time goes on and with the increase in vaccination many of the diseases are not seen as often and people start to believe that they have disappeared and that their animal is not at risk anymore, so why vaccinate? Over the last few years vets have seen an increasing number of cases where the disease could have been prevented had the cat been vaccinated.

The cost of treatment is far greater than the cost of vaccination.

So the advice still has to be to vaccinate your cats as advised by your vet. These are life-threatening diseases and the best way to protect your cat is to vaccinate them.

What do we vaccinate against?

Feline Herpes Virus

Feline herpesvirus (FHV, FHV-1) is a highly contagious virus that is one of the major causes of upper respiratory infections (URIs) or cat flu in cats. The virus is readily transmitted between cats through: direct contact, sharing food bowls and contaminated environments.



With FHV, after infection, virtually all cats will remain latently infected (the virus persists in nerve cells). This means that infected cats effectively become life-long carriers of the virus.

Feline Calicivirus

Feline calicivirus (FCV) is a small virus that mainly causes acute upper respiratory infections (URIs) in cats, although it has been associated with some other diseases also (see below). The virus is readily transmitted between cats through the same methods as herpes virus. It is the second main cause of cat flu.

It causes upper respiratory signs, gingivitis and stomatitis and can cause transient arthritis in younger cats.

Feline Leukaemia Virus

FelV belongs to a group of viruses known as 'oncornaviruses' and these viruses have the ability to cause the development of tumours (cancer) in infected individuals. Cats infected with FelV can develop lymphoma (a solid tumour of lymphocytes - a type of white blood cell), leukaemia (cancer of the bone marrow) and some other tumours. However, other major effects of FelV infection are severe immunosuppression and development of anaemia, and more cats will die of these complications than from development of tumours.



It has been estimated that 80-90 % of infected cats die within 3-4 years of FelV diagnosis.

In a persistently infected cat, large quantities of virus are shed in the saliva, and potentially the faeces, urine and milk. The virus is fragile and does not survive in the environment for any length of time. It is thought that infection is perhaps spread most commonly through prolonged social contact (mutual grooming, sharing of food bowls, litter trays etc., where virus may be ingested). However, the virus can also be transmitted through biting and if an entire queen is infected with FelV, any kittens she produces will also be infected (although many die or are aborted/resorbed before birth).

Feline Panleukopenia Virus

Feline infectious enteritis (FIE) is a disease caused by infection with feline parvovirus (FPV), also known as feline panleukopenia virus.

It is sometimes referred to as panleukopenia virus because one of the results of infection is the development of a low white blood cell count (which is what panleukopenia means).

Feline parvovirus infection is probably the greatest major disease threat to any rescue facility and infection carries a very high mortality rate, particularly in unvaccinated kittens.



In kittens over three or four weeks of age and in adult cats the virus causes a very severe gastroenteritis, following an incubation period of five to nine days. Affected cats develop acute onset haemorrhagic vomiting and diarrhoea and some cats die rapidly. The virus causes severe damage to the lining of the intestine and also travels via the blood to the bone marrow and lymph glands. Viral replication at these sites leads to a marked depletion of white blood cells. Infected cats and kittens usually have a fever, are obviously depressed and will not eat. Some cats may die before even showing signs of gastroenteritis.

Pregnant queens infected with parvovirus, the virus can spread to the unborn kittens where it can interfere with the developing brain. Kittens may then be born with a condition known as cerebellar hypoplasia (lack of development of the cerebellum, a part of the brain needed for fine coordination of movement). Kittens may initially seem fine, but as they start to move and walk it becomes obvious that they are highly uncoordinated. This may also happen in very young kittens (less than 4 weeks of age) infected with FPV as the cerebellum is still developing at that age.

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