The Top Three Fatal Feline Diseases

For years now, we’ve had safe and effective vaccines for distemper, rabies and the respiratory diseases that used to kill millions of cats every year. Because most of our clients are vaccinating their pets for them, these once very common infections are under control. (They are still common in outdoor and unvaccinated cats.)

There are three other infectious diseases that kill millions of cats per year and many of our patients are at risk. These diseases are known by a confusing set of initials - FeLV, FIV and FIP. About 10% of cats in this country are infected with one or more of these viruses. Once your cat becomes ill with any of these diseases he or she will eventually die. There are no effective treatments or cures. What will save cats’ lives is preventing the spread of these infections through blood testing and vaccination.

All three of these infections can be carried and spread for long periods of time by cats who are harboring the viruses with no obvious symptoms of disease. Cats who appear perfectly healthy can be infected yet not come down with an illness for months or years. During these months or years, however, they are contagious to other cats.

1. The number one infectious disease killer of cats in the United States today is Feline Leukemia Virus, or FeLV. FeLV destroys the cat’s immune system so that he falls prey to anemia, cancer or infectious diseases that a healthy cat would not get. A simple blood test is 99% accurate in diagnosing the disease. It is less accurate in kittens or in cats who have only recently been exposed to the disease. We routinely test all new cats and kittens entering a household. We recommend vaccination for this disease for kittens and for cats who go outdoors. Effective vaccines have been available for many years. If your adult cat receives this vaccine it should be boostered every year.

2. The next virus on our list is the Feline Immunodeficiency Virus, FIV, a relative of the HIV virus that causes AIDS in people. A blood test that will tell you whether your cat is a carrier for this disease is commonly done in conjunction with testing for FeLV. All cats should be tested for this disease, as these test results will influence all your health care decisions for the rest of your cat’s life.
In addition, a vaccine is available to prevent FIV. It requires 3 initial boosters in a series, and then annual vaccinations to maintain immunity. We currently only recommend this vaccine for cats at high risk for infection. Vaccinated cats may test positive for FIV even if they don’t actually have this disease.

3. Another fatal disease of cats is **Feline Infectious Peritonitis, or FIP**. FIP is a hardier virus than FeLV. It can survive in damp areas, such as the dirt in your garden or sandbox, for several months. You can track it into your house on your shoes, hands or clothes, but most healthy cats are fairly resistant to it. Most cases occur in crowded or stressful conditions such as in a shelter or breeding facility. A vaccine for FIP is available, however it is not currently felt to be effective. Unlike FeLV and FIV, blood testing is not very accurate and is generally done only when cats have illness that could possibly be due to FIP.

**Rules to remember to help prevent the spread of these fatal diseases:**

1. Keep your cat indoors. The more time he or she spends outside, the more exposure there is to infectious disease.

2. NEVER bring a new cat or kitten into the household and let it interact with other cats and kittens until you have it, and the resident cat, tested and vaccinated. Keep any new arrivals in a separate room with separate food and water bowls, and litter box, until your veterinarian tells you it's safe. Many of the cases of FeLV and FIP we see occur in an indoor cat in a household that recently adopted a new cat or kitten. Keeping new arrivals separated also cuts down the spread of parasites and respiratory infections. WASH YOUR HANDS AFTER HANDLING EITHER PET IF THEY ARE NOT TESTED AND VACCINATED. Also wash your hands after petting any unfamiliar cats outside your home.

3. Remember, 1 cat in 10 is carrying one of these viruses, healthy looking or not. That 1 cat in 10 may be in your house right now.

4. If your pet becomes ill with any of these three diseases it will die. We may be able to extend the cat’s life but we cannot save it. For a long, healthy life, be sure your companions are protected!
The tests and vaccines we are recommending for your cat have been marked below:

___ Blood testing for FeLV or FIV (circle one). We need only a few drops of blood.
   The cost is $______________.

___ Blood testing for FeLV and FIV. We need only a few drops of blood. The test takes about twelve minutes and is done here in our office.
   The cost is $______________.

___ Vaccination for FeLV. Two doses are required the first year. One dose is often given along with the FVRCCP distemper vaccination. Annual boosters are required, also usually given inexpensively along with the annual FVRCCP distemper vaccine. We usually recommend vaccinating all kittens but adult cats only if they go outdoors or are at high risk.
   The cost today will be $______________.
   In 3-5 weeks a second booster will cost $______________.

___ Vaccination for FIV. Three doses are required the 1st year, about one month apart.
   The vaccine is then boostered annually.
   The cost today will be $______________.
   Visits for the 2nd and 3rd boosters will be $______________ each.