

# Feline Diseases

This document is in no way intended to take the place of veterinary advice, but is simply intended as a supplemental reference. If you have any concerns at all about your cat's health, please consult your veterinarian.

There are a few zoonotic diseases, such as rabies, that can be passed between species, but most feline diseases are species-specific and are only contagious to other cats. There is an excellent article about zoonotic diseases at <http://www.vet.cornell.edu/fhc/resources/brochure/ZoonoticDisease.html>.

A complete discussion of feline diseases is beyond the scope of this document, but below is a quick overview of the more common cat diseases, along with internet articles that provide more comprehensive information.

- *Distemper*: Distemper (Feline Panleukopenia) is a highly contagious disease that can be deadly, especially in kittens, so cats should always be vaccinated for it. Symptoms include vomiting, diarrhea, high fevers, lethargy, and inappetance, but the symptoms can vary and may be missed altogether in a mild case. A very low white blood cell count is diagnostic. See the following articles for more comprehensive information:  
[http://www.avma.org/communications/brochures/panleukopenia/panleukopenia\\_faq.asp](http://www.avma.org/communications/brochures/panleukopenia/panleukopenia_faq.asp)  
<http://www.avma.org/careforanimals/animatedjourneys/pethealth/feline.asp>  
<http://www.winnfelinehealth.org/health/panleukopenia.html>
- *Herpes*: Herpes (Feline Rhinotracheitis) is very common in unvaccinated cats, so many rescued cats have had the disease. Symptoms include respiratory problems (sneezing, nasal discharge) and eye inflammation. A cat exposed to herpes virus may become a latent carrier and shed the virus during periods of stress or illness. Most cats are not greatly affected by the virus after they recover from the initial exposure, but an unvaccinated kitten should not be exposed to a cat that is symptomatic for herpes. There is a vaccination for herpesvirus, which is part of the standard “distemper” combo. It does not necessarily provide complete protection from the disease, depending on the cat's immune system, but it can help to minimize symptoms and reduce recovery time. See <http://www.fabcats.org/catflu1.html> or <http://www.winnfelinehealth.org/health/rhinotracheitis.html> for more information on Feline Herpes.
- *Calicivirus*: Calicivirus is another disease that, like herpes, causes flu-like symptoms in cats. Along with respiratory symptoms, calicivirus causes mouth ulcers, which is how it is often diagnosed. Some strains also cause joint pain, manifested by limping. The calicivirus vaccination is part of the “distemper” combo that should be administered to all cats. As with the herpes vaccination, protection may vary depending on the cat's immune response. Note that the vaccination can infrequently cause symptoms such as limping and fevers for a few days afterward. See the following articles for more information:  
<http://www.fabcats.org/catflu1.html>  
<http://duke.usask.ca/~misra/virology/stud2004/frdc/calicivirus.html>  
<http://www.winnfelinehealth.org/health/calici.html>
- *Feline Leukemia Virus*: Feline Leukemia Virus is a deadly and contagious retrovirus. In most cats it suppresses the immune system, which can lead to degenerative diseases, cancers, and a wide

**Tip** –  
Most cat diseases  
are not contagious  
to dogs or humans.

variety of infectious diseases. They may be susceptible to infections and they may heal poorly. There is a highly-effective vaccine available, but it has been implicated in vaccination-site sarcomas: aggressive cancers that occur at the site of certain vaccinations. So most vets recommend against vaccinating for Feline Leukemia Virus if there is very little chance your cat will be exposed to it.

All Partnership for Animal Welfare cats are tested for Feline Leukemia Virus and Feline Immunodeficiency Virus when they are first brought into PAW. Since there is a slim chance that the virus might have been incubating at that time, giving a false negative, some people choose to have the cat re-tested after adoption.

See <http://www.winnfelinehealth.org/health/FeLV.html> or <http://www.vet.cornell.edu/fhc/resources/brochure/felv.html> for more information.

- *Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV)*: FIV or cat AIDS is another retrovirus; however, it is not as communicable or as deadly as Feline Leukemia Virus. It is believed to be passed through deep bite wounds (so un-neutered males are the most likely candidates) or infrequently from mothers to their kittens. Symptoms include gingivitis or stomatitis, recurrent infections, slow healing, weight loss, or cancers. Fortunately, many cats with FIV live long, healthy lives, and many of them even share their homes with non-FIV cats.

Young kittens whose mother is FIV-positive may have antibodies from their mother's milk and can show a positive result on their FIV test. If they are re-tested later, they often turn out to be negative for the disease. It may take 3 months for the antibodies to clear, so don't give up on an FIV-positive kitten too soon.

There is a vaccination for FIV, but it is somewhat controversial at this time. It is not proven to be safe or effective, so most vets don't recommend it unless a cat is likely to be exposed to FIV.

For more information, see the following articles:

<http://www.vet.cornell.edu/fhc/resources/brochure/fiv.html>  
<http://www.winnfelinehealth.org/health/FIV.html>  
<http://www.animalhealthchannel.com/fiv/>

- *Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP)*: FIP is a fatal disease. There is a vaccination for FIP, but it has not been proven to be safe and effective and is not generally recommended for use unless a cat is likely to be exposed to FIP. It is caused by a coronavirus that is believed to mutate from a similar coronavirus – Feline Enteric Coronavirus (FECV) – which is very common in cats. It may also be passed through bodily secretions in some cases, but that is not certain. Some researchers believe that it is not passed from cat to cat, but that the virus mutates in cats whose immune systems are depressed or who are genetically predisposed. Cats in stressful conditions (e.g., catteries & shelters) are more likely to develop FIP, so even without lateral transmission there can be “epidemics” of FIP in certain settings. There is no cure, and the only treatment is supportive.

At this time there is no definitive test, because the test doesn't differentiate between the harmless and the deadly forms of the coronavirus. Also, if a cat has been vaccinated for FIP he will show up positive on the test. Symptoms can be vague, but in one form may include fluid in the chest and abdomen. Other symptoms may include fever, lethargy, inappetance and weight loss, but these may be symptoms of any number of other diseases. Sometimes an organ biopsy may be done. It's a very frustrating disease, since it's very hard to diagnose, there's no consensus on how it is passed, there is no effective treatment, and it is always fatal. For more information, refer to these articles:

<http://www.newmanveterinary.com/fip.html>  
<http://www.winnfelinehealth.org/reports/FIP-update-pt1.html>  
<http://www.vet.cornell.edu/fhc/resources/brochure/fip.html>

- *Lyme Disease*: In recent years, veterinarians have recognized that cats are susceptible to Lyme Disease, especially outdoor cats in areas where ticks are prevalent. Cats with Lyme Disease may show flu-like symptoms, but the symptoms may not appear until long after the disease has been contracted. Lyme Disease can lead to joint, heart, and kidney damage. Early treatment can help to prevent serious damage. The best treatment is prevention – either keep your cats indoors or if they go out, treat them with flea and tick deterrents. If you find a tick on your cat, remove it promptly (grip it with tweezers as close to the head as possible and pull firmly) and watch carefully for symptoms. For more information, see [www.lyme.org/otherdis/ld\\_pets.html](http://www.lyme.org/otherdis/ld_pets.html) and [www.sniksnak.com/cathealth/lyme.html](http://www.sniksnak.com/cathealth/lyme.html).
- *Urinary Tract Infections (UTI) and Feline Urologic Syndrome (FUS) and Lower Urinary Tract Disease (LUTD)*: Cats can develop several types of urinary problems, from stones to infection to crystals to blockages. These problems can be painful, they can cause litter box avoidance, and they can be life threatening. If your cat urinates frequently or has discolored urine or is avoiding the litter box, take him to the vet. If he has bloody urine and is showing other signs of distress, or if he is straining in the litter box or crying when he tries to urinate, this is a medical emergency, especially if he is not producing normal volumes of urine. Call the veterinarian immediately. If it is after hours, call the emergency hospital. If a cat has an untreated urinary obstruction, he can die within hours. Male cats are much more likely than females to develop a blockage, but it can happen in females too.

Some urinary problems can be treated with diet; some will require antibiotics; and some (like bladder stones) may require surgery. Some male cats have recurring problems and may need to have their anatomy surgically altered. Urinary problems in cats can be frustrating to treat, since in many instances the origin of the condition is unknown and treatment is not always effective. In spite of your vet's best efforts, treating cystitis can be a long and difficult battle. If your cat is prone to urinary tract disease, be vigilant and call the vet immediately if you see signs of a recurrence.

For more information, go to:

<http://www.vet.cornell.edu/fhc/resources/brochure/urinary.html>

<http://www.winnfelinehealth.org/health/urinary-tract.html>

- *Hyperthyroidism*: Hyperthyroidism is not uncommon in cats over 8 years old. Symptoms include weight loss, increased appetite, increased thirst, and sometimes vomiting and diarrhea. Some of these symptoms can mimic diabetes, but a simple blood test will give a definitive diagnosis. There are 3 treatments, all of which have their pros and cons:
  - Medication: Many cats can be controlled with a pill once or twice a day. But some experience side effects or are impossible to pill, and they would be candidates for surgery or radiation therapy.
  - Surgery: The thyroid is removed surgically. There is some risk with this surgery, as it is possible to damage the parathyroid glands, which can cause a life-threatening condition called hypocalcaemia (low blood calcium). Some cats have difficult recuperation periods. And thyroid tissue may grow back, requiring more treatment. The cat may require thyroid supplements after the surgery. The surgery is fairly expensive.
  - Radiation therapy: The abnormal thyroid tissue is destroyed by radiation. This is often the preferred treatment, especially for cats who don't tolerate the medication well, but it is expensive and requires hospitalization and some safeguards after the cat returns home. The treatment is non-invasive and is generally safe and effective, even with elderly cats.

See <http://www.winnfelinehealth.org/health/hyperthyroidism.html> for more information.

- *Diabetes:* It's not uncommon for cats to develop diabetes after they reach middle-age. It may be treatable with diet, but most cats will require insulin therapy. Some cats aren't easy to regulate, but many of them can live a long, full life with few complications. Some cats develop transient diabetes and then revert to normal, usually several weeks after insulin treatment has been started. They may then remain diabetes-free for life, or they may develop diabetes again later, in which case it will be permanent.
- *Cancer:* Cats can develop cancers just as other species do. The symptoms are variable, depending on the type of cancer, but may include fever, weight loss, lethargy, inappetence, soreness, coughing, difficulty breathing, and weakness. Some cancers can be treated with surgery or radiation or chemotherapy, but it will depend on the type of cancer and how far it has advanced. Your vet may refer you to a surgeon or an oncologist for treatment.

Vaccination-site sarcomas are aggressive cancers that develop where a vaccination was given. If your cat develops a lump after vaccination, keep an eye on it. If it doesn't go away after a few weeks, check with your vet.

- *Kidney Disease:* Any cat may develop renal disease, but it is especially common in geriatric cats. Cats may recover fully from acute renal disease, but there is no cure for chronic renal failure. However, there are a number of treatments, including special diet, medications for nausea and potassium deficiency, and administration of subcutaneous fluids. Some cats can live for years with the disease. Kidney transplants are available at some hospitals, but that is not a realistic option for most people. It is extremely expensive, usually requires weeks of travel, and requires life-long treatment with anti-rejection drugs. The owner must also be prepared to adopt the donor cat. An excellent source of information on chronic renal failure in cats can be found at <http://www.felinecrf.com>.
- *Heart Disease:* Cats can have several types of heart problems, including heart murmurs, cardiomyopathy, hypertension, valve disease, and congestive heart failure. Your veterinarian can diagnose some of these with an examination or x-rays or an EKG, but the most accurate assessment of cardiac disease is with a cardiac sonogram (echocardiogram), usually performed by a veterinary cardiologist. There are medications available (the same as for humans) that can greatly extend the life of a cat with heart disease. Some breeds, such as Maine Coons, are more likely to develop cardiomyopathy. Symptoms may include lethargy, difficulty breathing, coughing, or paralysis (from a clot). In some cases there are no discernible symptoms and an apparently healthy cat will be found dead.  
See <http://www.fabcats.org/cardiomyopathy.html> or <http://www.thepetprofessor.com/articles/article.aspx?id=355> for more information.
- *Hepatic Lipidosis (Fatty Liver Disease):* Unlike dogs and people, cats cannot fast for long periods without serious risk. Fasting cats, especially obese cats, can develop this life-threatening liver disease within days. Treatment may require tube feeding. If your cat stops eating for more than a day or two, take the cat to the veterinarian.
- *Other:* Like people and dogs, cats are susceptible to myriad ailments. Asthma, inflammatory bowel disease, gingivitis, arthritis, constipation, megacolon, skin disease, allergies – these are a few of the many problems that cats can develop, especially as they get older. Luckily most of them live long, trouble-free lives, but because there is always the risk of some hidden problem, it is important to have an annual exam (or twice-yearly exam for geriatric cats).

**Tip –**  
Fasting can cause serious, even fatal, illness in cats.