

## ANIMAL CARE AWARENESS

# Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) – What Every Cat Owner Should Know!



## Opinion



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Mary-Anne is a volunteer on assignment with Animals Fiji as part of the Australian Volunteers Program, an Australian Government Initiative.

**F**IV (Feline Immunodeficiency Virus) is a virus that affects cats that has some similarities to the human HIV virus and has much the same symptoms, (HIV causes the disease known as AIDS). FIV can be found in house cats as well as wild cats.

Dr Waruna Hewa Vitharana (Dr Waruna) Animals Fiji Veterinary explains that the virus weakens the cat's immune system, making it harder for the cat to fight diseases and more difficult for them to regain their health.

The good news is that FIV does not infect humans or other animals!

How does my cat get FIV?

Cats usually get FIV when they fight with an infected cat and get bitten. The virus lives in the saliva of an infected cat – but can only be passed on if the bite penetrates the skin. A cat grooming itself or grooming another cat won't pass on the virus.

A kitten can show a positive FIV result if its mother is infected, but the kitten cannot get infected that way and will not be positive once it stops drinking from its mother.

### Danger of FIV

FIV may eventually turn into Feline AIDS, but not always. If it does, you might see more problems like skin and mouth issues, and other infections. Your cat can also suffer from urinary tract infections, and stomach problems that won't go away.

How can I help treat my cat if it does have FIV?

There isn't a cure for FIV or a special treatment for it. The best thing is to work closely with your Vet and keep your cat well by feeding them healthy foods with some added vitamins to help their immune system. It is also important for your cat to be calm – so avoid any stressful situations like being close to dogs. There is a vaccine that reduces the chance of getting the virus, but it is only about 50% effective.

How your cat reacts to the infection depends on how severe the disease is, and it might not show



Harry, when he first came to Animals Fiji and before being adopted by Bec. A very unwell fellow.



Harry (right) watching Lini carefully for her next move in a game of who moves first! It is good to have different things for the cats to do when in the house, for example, the cat scratch polls and play gym in the background.

up for quite a while. Some cats with FIV can live a long and healthy life, while others get sick quickly and need to go to the vet hospital for treatment.

For some, it can progress quickly and the cat may only live a short time. Unfortunately, it is very hard to predict.

### Is it safe to have another cat if one has FIV?

Because FIV is transmitted through fighting and biting, having another cat in the house is safe for that cat. Usually, house cats only play fight and rarely bite each other hard enough to transmit the virus, so it is okay to have another cat.

If you are introducing a new cat to your house – it is best to keep them separate for at least two weeks and supervise small periods of time to-

gether until they know each other. Also, check with your Vet to ensure that the new cat is healthy, is vaccinated, dewormed, and desexed.

To wrap up:

Cats with FIV usually live a normal life if they don't get other serious diseases – so it is important to make sure you go to the Vet if your cat appears to act differently.

If you are worried about your cat's health, make an appointment with your Veterinary Clinic.

They will help you understand how to look after your cat and how best to treat it.

Animals Fiji helps animals all around Fiji, with clinics in Savasavu, Labasa, Nadi and Lautoka and they also hold outreach clinics in other areas.

If you want to support Animals Fiji in their work or to find out more

about Animals Fiji's services, simply contact their Savusavu Clinic on (+679) 998 6253 or Nadi Clinic on (+679) 993 6647 or visit their website at [www.animalsfiji.org](http://www.animalsfiji.org).

### Bec's story

Bec, a vet nurse with Animals Fiji has two special cats, Harry and Lini. Harry has been diagnosed with FIV and Lini hasn't. A persistent sore near Harry's mouth first caused Bec's concern. "I became worried that it wasn't healing so I decided to take him to the Vet Clinic for testing", she said. It was then that the diagnosis was made.

"He does get tired easily, but other than that he seems happy and looks and acts like a normal cat," she said, "Lini and Harry have lots of play fights – but never hurt each other."

### HOW DO I KEEP MY CAT SAFE FROM FIV?

Prevention is always the best option so please do the following to keep your cat as safe as possible.

- Keep your cat inside so that it doesn't get into fights with other cats
- Have your cat desexed – desexed animals are less likely to roam away from their home
- Make sure that you feed your cat a healthy balanced diet
- Exercise – have plenty of toys and cat gyms for them to play on. You can also train them to go for a walk on a leash! .
- Have regular checkups with your Vet Clinic

### HOW CAN I TELL IF MY CAT HAS FIV?

FIV symptoms/signs can vary, and they may not show up for several years after infection. Some early indications may be seen such as:

- Loss of appetite – your cat doesn't want to eat
- Weight loss – your cat is losing weight
- Diarrhoea – your cat has watery stool
- Lethargy/depression – your cat seems tired and sad.
- Hair loss/poor coat condition – your cat's fur falls out and coat looks dull.
- Swollen lymph nodes – new lumps at various places under the skin.
- Bumps and sores that don't heal.

Bec is very careful to keep their bedding and food bowls very clean so that Harry stays in good health.

"I also make sure that they have a good balanced diet, so that both and especially Harry, have the best possible chance to stay healthy. They are a little spoiled with a lot of different toys to play with and cat poles to climb. And I give them lots of hugs and playtime – which is probably mainly for me!" she added.

In Bec's capable and loving care, Harry and Lini are happy and contented cats and with continued care should have long and happy lives together.

Compassion and responsible pet ownership is the key to the well-being of our furry friends.

### FOOTNOTE:

In some countries where there are not many roaming cats like the United States - there is only a low percentage of cats infected with FIV (around per cent). In countries like Australia and some Asian countries, it can be as high as 25 per cent. While Fiji rates are unclear – they would be more likely to be higher than lower.