

Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP)

Feline infectious Peritonitis is one of the cat diseases most feared by cat owners and it is one that Ragdoll Cat owners coming to the UKRCC forum often ask about. The following information is designed to explain FIP for cat owners who are seeking a better understanding of the disease.

Feline CoronaVirus (FCoV)

The FIP virus is caused by the mutation of Feline CoronaVirus (FCoV). FCoV is a relatively harmless virus, which lives in the intestine of many cats. Infected cats shed the virus into the environment, mainly via faeces. FCoV is a highly infectious virus and if an uninfected cat comes into contact with it, e.g. through sharing a litter tray or food bowl with an infected cat, they have a high chance of becoming infected themselves. Research shows that in 90% of the cats FCoV infects, it causes little or no effect, with the only likely symptom being occasional, unexplained bouts of diarrhoea. These cats shed the virus for a number of weeks, produce antibodies and successfully eliminate the virus, without further problem.

Mutation into FIP

For reasons yet to be understood, 10% of cats infected with FCoV, the virus mutates and this new virus leaves the intestine of the cat and causes inflammation of the blood vessels.

There are two types of FIP:

Dry (non-effusive) FIP - a chronic form of the disease which causes several symptoms, such as weight loss, appetite loss and jaundice.

Wet (effusive) FIP - a much more acute form of the disease, which causes severe damage to blood vessels and leakage of fluid into the abdomen, leading to swelling or into the chest, leading to breathing difficulties.

FIP is most likely to affect very young cats, less than 18 months old or elderly cats. It is a disease which is more commonly associated with multi cat households and pedigree breeds. No one is sure what causes the FCoV to mutate into FIP in some cats, but it is suggested that stress could be a factor.

Symptoms of FIP

- Loss of appetite
- Weight loss
- Lethargy
- Breathing difficulties
- Swelling of the abdomen
- Changes within the eye, such as clouding or changes to the colour of the iris
- Clumsiness, loss of balance and fitting

Please note: The above is not an exhaustive list of symptoms, nor are they specific to FIP. Please consult your vet in the event that you observe any of the above in your cat.

Diagnosis, treatment and prognosis

While there is a blood test to detect FCoV, there is no test for FIP at this time, so diagnosis relies on the basis of a vet's opinion, given the symptoms that a cat presents. There are other diseases which cause similar symptoms, so diagnosis is often difficult. Even if a vet suspects FIP, they are likely to try treatment for the cat, to eradicate any causes of symptoms which may respond to medication. However there is no cure for FIP and treatment is really only supportive, aimed at easing the symptoms. Those cats who become infected with FIP die within a few weeks, often less.

Minimising the Risks

The FCoV virus is present in UK domestic cat populations, including in the Ragdoll breed. It can survive in the environment for several weeks and while there, any uninfected cats are at risk, with research suggesting up to 90% of cats who are exposed will become infected.

There is currently no vaccination in the UK for FIP, so all cat owners can do is minimise the risk of FCoV infection between cats and subsequent FIP mutation.

Litter Trays:

Good litter tray hygiene is vital as infected cats shed the virus in their faeces and this is the main way FCoV is spread .

- Remove faeces from the litter tray as soon as possible
- Completely change cat litter regularly, at least once a week.

- Wash litter trays, lids and scoops thoroughly in hot, soapy water. Once they are clean and free of all traces of faeces, disinfect them with a strong solution of bleach or a cat safe disinfectant, such as Trigenex.
- It is believed that the FCoV virus is spread among cats by faecal particles, which are unwittingly ingested by another cat. Faecal matter can be present on even the smallest pieces of litter, which can be picked up on a cat's feet and then ingested during washing. Use a minimal tracking litter and vacuum regularly to remove particles of litter from carpets, pet bedding, furniture etc.
- Provide at least one tray per cat
- Avoid contamination of food and water by placing bowls well away from litter trays.

Stress:

Researchers believe that stress is a factor in the mutation of the FCoV virus and studies have shown that cats who have developed FIP, were stressed in the period before illness occurred. It is advisable to minimise the stress we expose our cats to, especially if we know them to be carrying FCoV.

Some causes of stress in cats:

- Moving home
- Decorating
- Rehoming
- Introduction of a new cat or dog into the home
- Over crowding in a multi cat household.
- Arrival of a baby
- Cattery stays
- Neutering or other surgeries
- Pregnancy

If you have a cat which is, or may be, FCoV infected, then minimise their stress. In particular, avoid rehoming, delay neutering, dentals or any other non urgent surgery, avoid the introduction of other pets into the home and if you go away try to arrange for a pet sitter, rather than taking your cat to a cattery.

I recently lost a cat to FIP - Can I have another cat?

If you have lost a cat to FIP, providing there are no other cats in the home, the advice from researchers, studying the disease, is that you can bring a new cat into the home, after one month.

If you have other cats already, who were in contact with the cat infected with FIP, then they may be carrying the FCoV virus and shedding it into the environment. Your cats will need to be tested for the FCoV virus and no new cats should be introduced into your home until the antibodies for FCoV in all cats is at zero.

Homing a Pedigree Kitten

Researchers suggest that you ask for the breeder to test your kitten for the FCoV

Research into FIP

There is a team of researchers at Glasgow University, led by Dr Diane Addie, PhD, BVMS, MRCVS, studying the FCoV and FIP viruses and seeking to increase knowledge on treatment, prevention and cure. The only way they have to learn more about this disease is to collect data from the victims of FIP.

If you should lose a cat to FIP, as heart breaking as that time will be, please consider asking your vet about having a post mortem done by Dr Diane Addie's team. It is their work which will lead to a cure for this terrible, much feared disease. If you help by allowing them to perform tests on your cat, then you will be helping to further research and ultimately in finding a cure for FIP. You will be treated with care and respect throughout and your cat's body will be returned to you, for burial or cremation, if this is what you want.

Dr Diane Addie's website can be found at the following link:

<http://www.dr-addie.com/index.htm>