ANIMALS

Feline Leukemia Virus...

- Is a longterm, contagious viral infection spread by direct cat to cat contact.
- Affects two to three percent of the cat population.
- Kills very slowly.
- Vaccination reduces the risk of infection by only about fifty percent.

PROGRESS IN MEDICAL RESEARCH

Feline leukemia virus, or FeLV, is one of the most important causes of disease in cats today. Infected cats may show a variety of symptoms including fever, loss of appetite, weight loss, diarrhea, and anemia. FeLV caused illnesses may take a year or more to become noticeable and may persist for weeks, months, or even years. FeLV can cause death from cancer or from an AIDS like disease which destroys the cat's natural resistance to infection. The virus is spread from one cat to another through licking, biting, scratching, or sharing food bowls and litter boxes. A pregnant cat may pass the virus to her kittens before they are born and nursing mothers can transmit the virus in their milk. Animals that live closely together in a multi-cat household or large cattery are at a greater risk. A vaccine is available to help prevent infection in cats exposed to the virus.

Continued on back

PARTNERS

How has animal research helped with feline leukemia?

The use of cats in research enabled veterinary researchers to isolate the virus that is responsible for many feline diseases. FeLV was identified in 1964, but until 1970 researchers focused primarily on its cancer causing effects. That year a blood test was developed which proved that many cats suffering from a variety of illnesses are actually infected with FeLV. As a result, research took a new direction. Researchers found that FeLV infection could be present in cats for a long time without producing outward signs of disease. Additionally, the course and outcome of FeLV caused diseases were discovered to be unpredictable. Although a majority of exposed cats recover and become immune, many others remain carriers and continue to spread the virus. Various methods of treatment have been developed, including chemotherapy, blood transfusions, and the use of antibiotics to fight bacterial infections, but at this point treatment is not very effective and there is no cure.

Is animal research on feline leukemia still needed?

Since the virus affects cats in unique ways, cats must be used for additional studies. A more effective vaccine needs to be developed and tested, and ways to improve the immune system of infected cats is needed to help them overcome the virus before illness develops. This research may also help us learn more about AIDS in humans.

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