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Healthy Cats



Feline Panleukopenia (Feline Distemper)

Feline panleukopenia, also called feline infectious enteritis, is a **leading cause of death in kittens**. It has been called feline distemper, but it bears no relation to the virus that causes distemper in dogs. There may, however, be crossover infectivity between cats and the newer forms of parvovirus isolated in dogs.

Panleukopenia virus is present wherever there are susceptible animals. Mink, ferrets, raccoons, and wild cats all serve as a reservoir. The virus is highly contagious. It is spread by direct contact with infected animals or their secretions. Contaminated food dishes, bedding, litter boxes, and the clothes or hands of people who have treated an infected cat are other routes of exposure.

The panleukopenia virus has a special affinity for attacking white blood cells. The reduction of circulating white cells (leukopenia) gives the disease its name. Signs of acute illness appear two to ten days after exposure. Early signs include loss of appetite, severe apathy, and fever up to 105°F (40.5°C). The cat often vomits repeatedly and brings up frothy, yellow-stained bile. The cat may be seen crouching in pain, his head hanging a few inches over the surface of the water bowl. If he is able to drink, he immediately vomits. With pain in the abdomen, the cat cries plaintively.

Diarrhea may appear early in the course of the disease, but frequently comes on later. The stools are yellow or blood-streaked. In young kittens (and some older cats), the onset can be so sudden that death occurs before the owner realizes the cat is ill. It may seem as if the cat was poisoned.

Panleukopenia can be transmitted to kittens both before and shortly after birth. In such cases, the mortality rate is 90 percent. Kittens recovering from neonatal infection may have cerebellar brain damage and exhibit a wobbly, jerky, uncoordinated gait that is noted when they first begin to walk. Secondary bacterial infections are common. The bacterial infection, rather than the virus itself, may be the cause of death.

A white blood cell count confirms the diagnosis. In-office tests for canine parvovirus will also detect feline panleukopenia virus, which is a member of the parvovirus family.

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Cats who survive are solidly immune to reinfection but can shed the virus for several weeks. Along with asymptomatic carriers, this leads to repeated exposure in a population of cats. The repeated exposure helps to boost immunity among cats who have already acquired protective antibodies, by continuing to stimulate their immune systems.

Treatment: Detecting panleukopenia early in the course of the illness is of prime importance, because intensive treatment must be started at once to save the cat's life. It is better to consult your veterinarian on a false alarm than to wait until the cat is desperately ill. Supportive measures include fluid replacement, antibiotics, maintaining nutrition, and, occasionally, blood transfusions.

Prevention: The panleukopenia virus is hardy. It can survive in carpets, cracks and furnishings for more

than a year. It is resistant to ordinary household disinfectants but can be destroyed using a bleach solution (diluted with water at 1:32).

Most cats are exposed to panleukopenia sometime during their life. Vaccination is the most effective way to prevent serious infection.

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