

Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP)

By Virginia Clemans, DVM

Feline infectious peritonitis is a very devastating disease in cats caused by a corona virus. There are two forms of the disease: the wet form (with accumulation of massive amounts of fluid in the abdomen or chest) and the dry form (with no fluid accumulation). Cats of any age can be affected, but the disease occurs most often in young cats from six months to five years of age.



What are the signs that a cat has FIP?

At first, the signs of the disease can be hard to distinguish from many other conditions. The cat may have a fever, trouble breathing, runny nose or eyes, diarrhea or weight loss. If the cat has the wet form of the disease, he or she will have abdominal swelling. This swelling, combined with weight loss, makes the cat appear “fat,” but it is very easy to feel the spine and hip bones. If the fluid accumulation is in the chest, then difficulty breathing may be the only sign. Occasionally, there may be changes in the appearance of the eyes (clouding, redness or hemorrhage). Sometimes the disease also affects the nervous system, causing changes in personality or seizures.

How is the disease diagnosed?

Diagnosis by laboratory testing can be difficult since most cats naturally have the corona virus that causes the disease. What causes the development of the disease signs is the cat’s immune response to the virus. For this reason, FIP is not considered to be a contagious disease in the traditional sense. There is a laboratory test, but a positive test merely means that the cat has a corona virus, not that the cat will develop the disease.

Diagnosis is very often made by analysis of the characteristic fluid drawn from the abdomen or chest coupled with the development of the characteristic signs of the disease. In cats with the dry form of the disease, diagnosis can be more difficult.

Is there a cure for the disease?

Once the cat is showing clinical signs, there is no cure. FIP typically runs a course of a few days to a few weeks before the cat succumbs to the disease. But, adult cats with the wet form may linger for six to eight months and cats with the dry form may survive a year or more. Cats infected with FeLV and/or FIV are more prone to develop clinical FIP. Despite supportive care, all cats that develop clinical signs of the FIP virus will die or will need to be humanely euthanized. The incidence of clinical disease is low in most cat populations and especially low in single-cat households. The disease prevalence is highest in multi-cat facilities or households. There is a vaccine available for FIP, but its efficacy is low and therefore it cannot be relied upon to prevent the disease.

Dr. Virginia Clemans was Best Friends’ chief veterinarian from 2001 to 2004. She now resides in Salt Lake City, where she is chief of staff for the Utah County Fix, a low-cost, high-volume spay/neuter and vaccine clinic sponsored by No More Homeless Pets in Utah, Maddie’s Fund and Best Friends Animal Society.