



Ernest Waintraub takes a break from his job as a Chicago emergency-room doctor twice a year to visit Best Friends. It's his way to unwind and connect with animals. Specifically, cats. Even more specifically, FIV cats.

FIV

Cats

Debunking the myths and fighting the stigma of this feline-specific virus

by Amy Abern

Last year, Waintraub adopted Edward, a FIV-positive cat, from Best Friends and brought him home to live with his non-FIV cats. Edward gets along famously with his feline pals, playing, grooming and snuggling with them.

On his next trip to Best Friends, Waintraub plans to adopt another FIV cat. Over the years, he has bonded with many Best Friends FIV-positive residents. Cats he sees year after year ... cats who never get adopted.

"I think it's harder for FIV cats to find a home because of the stigma attached to the virus," says Waintraub. "If I can give one of them a chance for a happy home, then I'm going to do it."

That stigma surrounding FIV (feline immunodeficiency virus) comes from lack of knowledge. Some common FIV myths: It's highly contagious. (It's not.) Cats can't live long with FIV. (Yes, they can.) And the most devastating myth of all: Testing positive for FIV is an automatic death sentence. It isn't, but lots of cats still lose their lives because of it. The virus itself isn't the killer; it's the misguided belief of shelter officials and even some veterinarians that the way to fight FIV is to euthanize infected cats. The result is that hundreds of thousands of cats are killed every year simply because they've been diagnosed with FIV.

Numerous studies show that the virus is not easily transmitted and that FIV-positive cats often live long and symptom-free lives. Currently, 69 FIV-positive cats live at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary. In general, the adoption rate for the FIV cats is much lower than that of the non-FIV cats. Best Friends medical director Dr. Mike Dix believes that misinformation is one of the greatest obstacles in finding homes for FIV cats.

"The biggest misconception about FIV cats is that they cannot lead a healthy, happy life," says Dix. "They certainly are prone to getting secondary infections, especially if they are exposed to a lot of cats, but most of the time they can deal with these infections quite nicely on their

own. We have had cats here with FIV who have lived well into their senior years." (Cash, a 19-year-old FIV cat who spent his entire life at Best Friends, was recently adopted into a forever home!)

What is FIV?

FIV falls into the same category as the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). FIV is a lentivirus, meaning it's species-specific and can't be spread from one species to another. Lentiviruses progress slowly and may take years to produce symptoms.

FIV is a relatively hard virus to transmit because it can't exist for more than a few seconds in open air. The most common forms of transmission are through severe bite wounds and through an infected mother cat giving birth to kittens. The virus attacks the T-cells, the white blood cells specific to support of the immune system. Evidence of the virus may be detected within four to six weeks of infection through a blood test.

Common secondary infections associated with FIV include stomatitis, which is an inflammation of the mucous lining of the mouth; upper respiratory infections; and skin diseases. "None of these are life-threatening," says Dix. "Non-FIV cats are susceptible to the same conditions, even with healthy immune systems."

Combat is complicated

Protocols to deal with FIV have evolved over the years, thanks to the diligent efforts and research conducted by some of the major players in the field, such as Best Friends; Alley Cat Allies, a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting our country's cat population; the Feral Cat Coalition, a high-volume spay/neuter outfit out of San Diego; Operation Catnip, a group working to reduce stray and feral cat populations through sterilization; and the Cornell Feline Health Center. Specifics about best prac-

tices to stem the progression and spread of the virus are far from being written in stone, but some general guidelines have emerged.

At the PetSmart Charities Feline Forum conference last September, Operation Catnip director Dr. Julie Levy stated that the U.S. companion cat population is estimated at 88 million; the free-roaming cat population is estimated at 50-70 million. Add to the mix a statistic from Becky Robinson, founder and president of Alley Cat Allies, that anywhere from 2 to 5 percent of all cats may be infected with FIV. These stats suggest the FIV-positive population in the U.S. ranges anywhere from 2.7 million to 6.9 million.

"Spay/neuter is the best defense for so many issues surrounding the general cat population, feral and non-feral," says Robinson. "This is particularly true for warding off FIV. In male cats, neutering changes their demeanor and makes them less likely to fight, which makes it less likely they'll bite

and transmit the disease. By spaying female cats with FIV, the virus isn't spread to a new generation of cats."

There are vaccines and tests for FIV, but vaccines are generally not recommended for several reasons: Some vaccines work on some strains of FIV and not others.

"I don't understand why people don't get that FIV is not a big deal."

Some cats don't "take" to the vaccine. And a vaccinated cat will always test positive for FIV.

A diagnosis of FIV often translates into certain death for shelter cats. According to Robinson, 70 percent of cats who enter the U.S. shelter system are euthanized. When shelter officials have to make the decision on who lives and who dies, cats who have tested positive for FIV are often automatically given the death sentence.

Should cats be tested for FIV? Well, yes and no. Most reputable shelters automatically test incoming cats for the virus to keep the healthy population separate from the FIV population. In a perfect world, FIV-positive cats are retested after 60-90 days of the original diagnosis to rule out false positives. And even then, there's no guarantee that the FIV-positive result stems from the actual virus or antibodies from the FIV vaccine.

Most experts in the field agree that shelter cats should always be tested for FIV before going to a forever home. But testing for testing's sake isn't always recommended. In the early days of Operation Catnip, testing for FIV was part

of the spay/neuter routine. Then Dr. Levy visited the Feral Cat Coalition in San Diego, which didn't test for FIV and, as a result, could perform more spay/neuter procedures in a day and at a lower cost. In an interview with Becky Robinson posted on the Alley Cat Allies website, Dr. Levy explains, "Of the \$16 we spent on each cat, \$11 went to testing. Because the [FIV] infection rate was low, we were spending about \$200 to identify each positive cat. That \$200 could have funded sterilization of 40 more cats."

FIV heroes

FIV cats have several advocates working on their behalf to keep them safe and healthy and to get them into forever homes. The Tree House Humane Society, a no-kill cat sanctuary in Chicago, offers free yearly exams and other medical procedures at cost for people adopting from the FIV population. Recently, it lifted its longstanding policy of not adopting out FIV cats into homes with non-FIV cats. Tree House development director Jenny Schlueter says, "We've learned enough to know that if the FIV cat has no behavioral issues and can get along with other cats, there's very little risk to the healthy cats. This has helped increase our FIV adoptions."

At Best Friends, Cat World manager Bobbie Foster insists that when it comes to FIV cats, we "walk the walk." When Best Friends rescued 800 cats from a hoarding situation in Pahrump, Nevada, testing for FIV was part of the intake protocol. Two cats, Clark and Quincy, lived together in one cage. They had bonded; they were each other's best friend. Clark was FIV-positive, Quincy was not.

"There was serious discussion about whether the cats should continue to live together," says Foster. "I said, 'Absolutely!' After all, if they lived together all that time in such a confined space and Clark hadn't already transmitted the virus, it would be highly unlikely that he'd pass it on now." The two stayed together and were adopted out together.

In Memphis, Tennessee, Jen Crews took in a FIV cat in 1994. She had no idea what FIV meant. She named the cat Fitzhugh B. Crews. The cat died in 2006, and Crews still mourns his passing. But during his lifetime, Crews learned more about FIV and started rescuing FIV cats facing death sentences in local shelters. Today she runs the no-kill Fitzhugh B. Crews FIV Cat Sanctuary, home to more than 60 FIV cats.

"I don't understand why people don't get that FIV is not a big deal," she says. "We have cats here that are now 11 to 13 years old; they've never had as much as a sniffle. The oldest cat we had here died at 19 years old from a thyroid condition. To think he might not have lived out his life because he was branded with FIV, well, that's just wrong." 🐾

Talk to us! We want to hear about your FIV cats. Drop us a note at editor@bestfriends.org.