

FIV Exposure and Testing

What is the risk when an FIV positive cat is introduced into a cattery? Dr. Holck explains why we consider this scenario to be low risk, when to test, and what diagnostic testing to use to move cats through.

Question:

I have a question around FeLV/FIV. We had an adult cat that we transferred into one of our communal cat rooms for adoption and when she was adopted, her adopters elected to have a SNAP FIV/FeLV test done. She tested positive (weakly) for FIV. We plan on isolating her and retesting her in 30 days. My question is about the other 4 cats in the room with her. They have all been exposed for the two days she spent in the room with them. Would you also recommend isolating those cats and retesting in 30 days? Thank you as always for answering what feels like silly questions, but I appreciate you understanding the need to be sure and supporting us all in times of need.

Answer:

Thank you for your questions! I can appreciate that FIV testing is sometimes complicated and made even more complicated in a shelter setting with group housing!

For the other cats who have been in the communal room with this cat, the risk is very low. It would not be unreasonable to adopt these cats out 'as is' while clearly communicating with adopters that they were housed for a few days with a cat who tested positive for FIV. It would not be different from any other adopted cat with an unknown background. Otherwise, you can consider sending in a PCR test for the cats who have been potentially exposed, as the PCR test provides reliable results faster (can be performed 2 weeks from date of last exposure) than the SNAP test. For a SNAP test, we recommend waiting 60 days from the last point of exposure as this is the time it takes the body to produce a reliably measurable amount of antibodies that will be detected by the test. Although the test itself might be cheaper when compared to the cost of PCR, the cost of housing the cats longer in the shelter as well as the benefits of moving animals through the shelter efficiently most likely outweigh the differences in testing costs. In both cases, it is important to note that false negatives are possible, but a negative test along with the low risk of transmission will make FIV unlikely.

It's important to remember that FIV is most commonly transmitted by bite wounds or sexual intercourse so if the cats in the room were all spayed/neutered and friendly towards each other, the likelihood of FIV transmission is very low. You can closely examine all the cats from this communal room for evidence of bite wounds to know whether these cats are at greater risk for being FIV positive. We recommend allowing these cats to all continue to be available for adoption even if you elect to test them and their true status is unknown until their testing.

As long as all of this background information is relayed to a potential adopter, there is no reason the cats must stay in your care if there is an adopter willing to adopt them as is. The adopter will be aware that their new cat has potentially been exposed to FIV, and the responsibility for the SNAP test or PCR can then be transferred to the adopter.

In the meantime, I would not introduce any new cats to this communal room and I would recommend an all-in-all-out policy. If you need that communal space for new cats, we recommend moving these animals to foster, an office space or individual double-sided housing where they would not co-mingle with other cats. If you are planning to wait 60 days before making these cats available, housing them in kennels, even double-sided, is not an ideal solution.

For your positive cat, it is important to remember that the SNAP test for FIV/FeLV is not a perfect diagnostic test, that false positives are possible although rare, and that the intensity of the color of the test is not a reliable indicator. If this adult cat was truly positive on the initial SNAP test, rerunning a SNAP test in 30 days versus running another SNAP test today to confirm a positive result will not change anything. Unlike in a kitten where we are concerned about maternal antibody interfering with test results, an adult cat who is truly positive for FIV on a SNAP test today will also be positive on a SNAP test 30 days from now, 60 days from now, or even 3 years from now.

If you want to confirm the positive SNAP test, you can consider PCR testing as a positive PCR test can make you confident in saying this cat is positive for FIV. The thing to consider here is that a negative PCR test does not necessarily rule out FIV, although it may make FIV less likely in an otherwise healthy cat. You can then relay this information to potential adopters—letting them know that this cat did have a positive SNAP test for FIV, however sometimes these tests are inaccurate.

While we no longer recommend FIV/FeLV testing all healthy cats in a shelter, we do recommend FIV/FeLV testing cats before they are housed with other cats from different previous homes or cats with a clinical portrait supportive of these diseases (bite wounds, abscesses, dental disease,

lethargy, etc.). This way you can decrease the chance for exposure to FIV/FeLV to future communal room populations. An FIV positive cat can still be housed in the general adoptable population in its own, individual double-sided housing unit or housed with other known FIV positive cats. There should be proper signage to convey that this cat is FIV positive so that staff members and adopters are aware. We aren't concerned about transmitting FIV from cat to cat during cleaning, but we should be aware that FIV positive cats may have a compromised immune system so extra care should be taken to avoid handling sick cats before handling the FIV positive cats.

Finally, we want to point out that a cat can live a long healthy life with FIV. There are some great resources on the UW Shelter Medicine website that can be used to help educate shelter staff and adopters about cats living with FIV: [here](#) and [here](#).

I hope this helps answer some of the questions you have about FIV testing for these cats. Please let us know if you have any further questions or concerns!

Bridget Holck, DVM
Maddie's Shelter Medicine Intern
Shelter Medicine Program
University of Wisconsin – School of
Veterinary Medicine
www.uwsheltermedicine.com
www.facebook.com/UWShelterMedicine

