What should we do when a kitten tests positive for FIV?

Dr. Dines shares considerations when faced with a kitten with a positive FIV test.

Question:

Hi there,

Because we aren't testing every cat any more, we don't use FeLV only SNAP tests very regularly. We just had to toss an almost full box because it was expired. We've decided to just use a Combo test (FeLV/FIV) if an adopter decides they want to test a kitten (or if we do for some other medical reason).

My question is what would be the responsible action if the FIV antibody test was positive on a kitten under 6 mo? I know you are supposed to wait 60 days and retest and keep doing that until 6 mo of age. If they stay positive then they are really positive but if they turn negative then it was just maternal abs. I am just not sure that I feel super great about just "ignoring" the result if it is positive without including it in the notes to adopters. But if I include it it will likely increase that kitten's LOS.

Thoughts?

Answer:

Hello,

I am in agreement about what is most responsible, and that is disclosure to potential adopters. Although this might increase the LOS for kittens, I can tell you anecdotally that when we
explain to adopters the many factors involved with FIV testing and disease, it is generally not a barrier to adoption.

These considerations are discussed below and most can also be found in our information sheet on FIV.

1. The complexities of the test - We are testing for antibody and not antigen with most FIV ELISA assays, such as Idexx SNAP Combo tests. Therefore, a positive test does not mean active infection. As you said, it can be from maternal antibodies that will go away over time, antibodies from true infection, and though less likely, antibodies from vaccines. Also, we have to keep in mind that a negative test also does not mean the cat is not infected. 

   The Cornell Feline Health Center explains this well, "A negative test result indicates that the cat’s body has not produced antibodies directed against FIV. In most cases, this suggests that a cat is not infected. However, it usually takes eight to 12 weeks after infection for detectable levels of antibody to appear in the bloodstream, so testing performed during this interval may result in false negative results. Therefore, antibody-negative cats that have had contact with a cat that is either infected with FIV or has an unknown FIV status, such as through the bite of an unknown cat, should be retested a minimum of 60 days after their most recent exposure. This allows the cat’s body time to develop antibodies to the virus."

2. Prevalence of the disease- FIV in itself is pretty rare with an average prevalence of 2.5% overall and actually was found to be less prevalent in cats tested at shelters than in veterinary clinics.

3. Implications of actual disease- With proper care most cats with FIV live, long healthy lives. AAFP recommends known retrovirus positive cats have prompt treatment when there are signs of illness, but would this recommendation be different for any non-retrovirus positive cats showing signs of illness?


4. Likelihood for transmission to other cats- Studies have demonstrated that FIV in sterilized cats with proper introductions is not readily transmitted through casual contact, but usually in the instance of deep bite wounds.


5. Further testing- As you said, you can repeat SNAP tests every 60 days. There are also other options like PCR and Western Blot, with PCR being the more sensitive of the two. However, you must weigh the benefits and costs of these tests and decide if you want to commit to these costs or inform the adopter of the previously discussed components.

Please let us know if you have further questions or concerns!
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