

Feline panleucopenia (Feline infectious enteritis)



Feline panleucopenia is a very serious disease of cats which, before vaccination, was commonly fatal. Even today, with good nursing care, between a quarter and two-thirds of all affected cats will die from the disease.

What is panleucopenia?

Panleucopenia is a serious disease in cats. It is caused by a virus very similar to the one that causes 'parvo' infections in dogs. However, there is no risk of the disease spreading from cats to dogs, from dogs to cats, or to people.

How is the disease spread?

Affected cats pass the virus in their faeces and it can live for a long time outside the body. It is very difficult to kill the virus and most household disinfectants are not very good at doing so. Most cats are infected from the virus lying around in the environment, on bedding or food bowls previously used by infected cats. Kittens may also be infected inside the womb by the virus passing across the placenta from their mother, if she herself is infected while pregnant.

What are the signs of panleucopenia?

Panleucopenia causes severe vomiting and diarrhoea. Sometimes the disease progresses so quickly that a kitten may die before the owner notices any signs. In other animals, the vomiting starts before the diarrhoea and it may appear as if your kitten has swallowed something they shouldn't. The disease is often initially mistaken for foreign bodies stuck in the gut or poisoning. Kittens often go downhill very quickly because once they stop eating and drinking they become dehydrated very quickly. Older cats may show less severe signs and, if mother cats are infected whilst they are pregnant, they may only have a day or two of being off colour (which may go unnoticed). The kittens however, can be severely affected if they are infected inside the womb and may be born with deformities or brain damage. If the mother is infected in early pregnancy, miscarriage may occur.

How do vets diagnose panleucopenia?

The disease can be difficult to detect in early cases. Your vet will probably suspect the disease from the clinical signs and the fact that your cat has not been vaccinated. Blood tests may show that the numbers of white blood cells have dropped to dangerously low levels. It is possible to identify the virus in the diarrhoea from affected cats but this is rarely done unless a lot of cats are at risk, (for example if the affected cat comes from a cattery). Measuring the level of antibodies in your cat's blood may also show that they have been infected.

Can panleucopenia be treated?

There is no treatment that will get rid of the virus from your cat's body - your cat must fight off the infection. However, without intensive nursing care, many cats will die from the effects of the disease (such as dehydration). Because your cat's immunity will be low, she will be at risk from infection with bacteria and so antibiotics may be given. Most kittens are so sick that they have to be admitted to hospital for a week or so to receive intensive care if they are to recover.

Can the disease cause long-term effects?

If a cat recovers from panleucopenia they are highly unlikely to catch the disease again. However, in some cases the gut is so badly damaged by the infection that it can never recover properly. Cats may occasionally have problems absorbing all the nutrition from their food after a severe infection, and may not put on weight or have persistent diarrhoea.

Can panleucopenia be prevented?

There is a vaccine that can prevent your cat catching panleucopenia. This vaccination is included in the annual injections given by your vet. If their mother is fully vaccinated, kittens will get some immunity from her in the milk. This immunity begins to wear off around 6-12 weeks of age. Unfortunately, the vaccine is not normally given until a kitten is 9 weeks old, and the kitten is not fully protected until after the second

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vaccination at around 12 weeks. There is a critical period where your kitten is very vulnerable to infection and, during this period, it is essential that your kitten does not come into contact with the virus. She should be kept in the house and away from other cats although if you have cats living in the house who are fully vaccinated and have had a recent booster vaccination, they should not pose too much of a risk.

Annual boosters are required to maintain protection and cats should have booster vaccinations before they get pregnant. Pregnant cats should not be given vaccines as this can cause defects in the kittens.

When is it safe to get another cat?

If you have had a kitten die from panleucopenia it is always very distressing. However, there may come a time when you want to get another cat - but will it be safe? The virus can live for a long time in the environment (up to a year) so it is probably safer to bring an adult, vaccinated cat into the house, rather than a new kitten.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your cat please contact your local Village Vet practice and we will be happy to advise you.