



FELINE PANLEUKOPENIA

What is Feline Panleukopenia?

Feline Panleukopenia, also known as “Panleuk” or Feline Distemper, is a contagious disease in cats caused by a parvovirus. You may have heard of parvo in dogs; the symptoms of this disease are somewhat similar in cats.

What are the symptoms?

This disease mostly affects young kittens (under five months old), and symptoms may include lethargy, loss of appetite, vomiting, and diarrhea (sometimes with blood). They can have a fever initially as well. The virus works by reducing the white blood cells in the body (the cells that would fight the virus), and then attacks the gastrointestinal system. Once the cat’s immunity is low, secondary bacterial disease can then attack their body and cause more serious disease.

How does the disease spread?

This disease is spread by what is called a “fecal-oral cycle”. Parvovirus can be found in all body secretions (saliva, vomit, urine), but feces contain the highest amount of the virus. A cat becomes infected either directly from another cat or from a “fomite”, which something that had contact with the virus, like a litterbox, food bowl, or human skin/clothing. Environmental exposure is called “transmission by fomites,” and it occurs because the virus is so long-lasting and so difficult to destroy. The virus can even last long after the original body secretion has faded away.

Is there a way to protect cats against this disease?

Yes! The core vaccine for cats, the FVRCP vaccine, is very effective at protecting against the disease. Unfortunately, as explained in the next section, kittens aren’t totally protected by the vaccine until they are 20 weeks of age (5 months). The vaccine is so effective in cats over five months that we aren’t concerned about infection in these cats (as long as they are up-to-date on vaccines), even if they have been directly exposed to a positive panleukopenia cat.

Why are kittens more susceptible to the virus?

Kittens may receive some immunity against Panleukopenia from their mother through maternal antibodies. Unfortunately, this is often insufficient to totally protect them from disease. And because many of our cats come from unknown circumstances, the mom cats may not have



been protected against the disease through vaccination before coming to us. Also unfortunately, those maternal antibodies interfere with the kitten developing their own immunity against the disease through vaccination. To help protect the kittens, we provide vaccination every two weeks in the shelter environment (every three weeks in foster care because of no exposure to other shelter cats/kittens) until 20 weeks of age (5 months), when it is known that the maternal antibodies are low enough in a kitten's system to allow them to develop a sufficient immune response. The maternal antibodies and frequent vaccination won't necessarily keep them from developing disease, but can decrease the severity of the infection.

What do I need to know about adopting a kitten that has recovered from Panleukopenia?

We consider the kitten "recovered" once clinical signs have resolved and two weeks have passed since diagnosis (kittens are isolated during this time to prevent spread of the disease). It is known, however, that the kitten could possibly still shed the virus in body secretions for up to 4 weeks after that recovery. For that reason, we recommend one of the following situations when adopting a kitten within that 4-week possible shedding period:

- 1) Other cats in the home are fully vaccinated and over five months of age OR
- 2) The kitten is kept isolated in an area in the home until after that 4-week period, and that area is then fully cleaned with a 1:32 bleach solution. Items that can't be cleaned or that frequently have fecal exposure (like a litterbox) should be thrown out so as not to expose the other cats OR
- 3) The adoptive home has no other cats.

In addition, since the virus lasts so long in the environment (up to a year or more), it would be best not to add a kitten under five months of age to the household in the future without first consulting your veterinarian about cleaning and vaccination.