



FIV: Catching a Bad Case of Rumors

By Kristi Littrell

Despite what many people think, cats with this condition can live perfectly long, happy, healthy lives. I was on my way back to the sanctuary after a family visit in Colorado. Curled up beside me, purring contentedly, was Reggie, the cat nobody dared take in. You'd think he was an unexploded bomb or an X-rated movie.

Make that FIV-rated

FIV stands for Feline Immunodeficiency Virus. It's a lentivirus, meaning that it progresses very slowly, gradually affecting a cat's immune system. It is passed through blood transfusions and through serious, penetrating bite wounds - mainly by stray, intact tom cats. The most well-known lentivirus in humans is HIV. But the two are not at all the same, and you can't get FIV from a cat. In fact, the only thing about FIV that you can catch is a bad case of the rumors.

Deconstructing Reggie

Reggie is six years old. "I fell in love with him at the shelter and decided to try to find him a home," said Connie, who had rescued him, but then became infected by the rumors. "When my vet diagnosed him with FIV, nobody wanted him."

"How does he get on with other cats?" I asked, innocently.

"My cats have NOT been exposed to him," Connie replied. "So I don't know how he reacts to other cats."

I started to explain that a friend of mine, Karen Green, has had her FIV cat, Bentley, living with her other cats for five years, but Connie was already glazing over. She didn't even want to listen, even though she wanted the best for Reggie.

Reggie stretched and snoozed some more in the car. And I spent the 12-hour drive thinking about finding Reggie - and other cats like him - a good home. When I got back, I went straight to visit Karen.

Bentley - like a Rolls

"I once got a desperate e-mail from an 80-year-old woman," she told me. "Her only cat had just been diagnosed with FIV. The cat was perfectly normal and healthy, but her veterinarian had suggested euthanizing him. The woman was desolated. She asked if we would take him at Best Friends. I said she should keep him. But it was my word against the vet's."

(While Karen is talking, Bentley jumps onto her lap. He's a big cat, with a purr like a Rolls Royce - or maybe a Bentley.)

"He was a stray cat who a woman had been putting out food for until she became incapacitated I took him home myself. He has such personality. I wasn't surprised when he tested positive for FIV. He fit the standard high-risk profile - he'd been a large, roaming, unneutered male."

Bentley continues to be the most mellow and affectionate cat. Kids love him. So do other cats. Men admire his macho good looks, and with his paternal instincts, he has helped Karen foster 12 kittens in the past five years. All of them tested negative for FIV, of course.

"I had a roommate," Karen tells me, "whose vet told her to euthanize her 12-year-old cat when he

was diagnosed with FIV! Big John is now 20 years old and completely blind, but otherwise perfectly healthy! People are always surprised to see how healthy Bentley is. But that's the way most of them are!"

She has some happy-ending stories, too, like the letter from a woman who wrote: "After reading about FIV, I realized that much of the fear is simply unfounded. So I've decided to keep this cat and raise him with my other cat, Jasmine."

As long as cats with FIV are not exposed to diseases that their immune system can't handle, they can live perfectly normal lives. And they can only pass the virus on to other cats through a serious, penetrating bite wound. So unless your cats at home routinely tear each other to pieces, it's not a problem. (And if your cats are tearing each other up, that's probably a bigger problem!)

What's in a name?

Faith Maloney, our director of animal care, has two FIV kitties. "I'd had Chevalier for four years before I moved house and decided to test all of my other cats for FIV at the same time. Since they don't fight, none of the others was FIV positive. I even took in another FIV kitty last year."

Here at Best Friends, we have two rooms exclusively for FIV kitties. "They're some of the most gentle and affectionate cats here at the sanctuary," says Judah Battista, who's in charge of all the cats here. Judah thinks the discovery of FIV, about 15 years ago, was a very mixed blessing. "If you go back 15 years, before anybody tested for FIV, all of these little guys would be in homes living long, normal lives. But we've discovered something we can put a name to - even if the cats never get sick!"

Adopting an FIV cat

Dennis Cook and Anne Tatom live near Seattle, Washington with 17 kitties, seven of whom are FIV positive. Four of those seven came from Best Friends, and all of them live happily together. Anne enjoys e-mailing people who are interested in learning more about living with FIV kitties. "I have been a Best Friends member for years, and I understand that FIV kitties need a home, too. Sure, you have to be careful and introduce the new cat properly to the others. But the cats we adopted from Best Friends - Simon, Malcolm, Sir Lancelot, and Wink - have blended into my home just fine."

For Anne, it began when she took in a stray kitty she had been feeding and the vet told her he had FIV. Anne did some research and chose a veterinarian who was up to date on FIV. Surprisingly, many are not. When FIV was first discovered, the HIV scare was in high gear. A lot of vets didn't want to take any chances, so the rule of thumb was: "FIV cats should immediately be separated from non-infected cats. If you can't do this in your home, then find a place that will take them or have them euthanized." No wonder so many wonderful kitties were coming to Best Friends!

Dissolving old fears

Dr. Susan Cotter, professor of hematology and oncology at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine, is one of those who have helped dissolve these old fears. "I wouldn't advise getting rid of a cat that tests positive for FIV," she says. "If the cat is young and healthy, it could be years before anything changes."

Best Friends veterinarian Dr. Virginia Clemans says the one important thing is to keep your FIV cat healthy. (That, of course, is good advice for all your cats!)

"The virus affects the immune system," she explains. "So keep FIV cats indoors. Make sure they get regular vaccinations. And give them a high-quality diet. Keep an eye on them, and take them to the veterinarian at the first sign of illness."

Am I in the wrong room?

A couple of weeks after I had brought Reggie to the sanctuary, I went to visit him at the TLC Cat Club. Lezlie Sage, our cat adoption person, was there, too, trying to decide whom to take on a weekend mobile adoption trip. "When I first came to work at Best Friends, I walked into one of our FIV rooms, and I thought I must be in the wrong room. I didn't know very much back then, and I expected to see sick cats. But all I saw were healthy ones. Now I know about FIV, and I know there's absolutely no reason for these wonderful kitties not to be in good homes."

As Lezlie was talking, sweet Reggie had curled up in my lap and gone to sleep. I looked around and saw some of the most handsome, healthy cats you could imagine. A bunch of them were all curled up in a basket together, grooming each other and purring. The most comfortable kitties in the world, I thought.

For more information on adopting a big, handsome, affectionate ball of furry love from the FIV room, visit our Web site or e-mail infor@nbcrtx.org.

FIV Facts

- The Feline Immuno-deficiency Virus is a slow virus that affects a cat's immune system over a period of years.
- FIV is a cat-only disease and cannot be spread to humans or other non-felines.
- FIV cats most often live long, healthy, and relatively normal lives with no symptoms at all.
- FIV is not easily passed between cats. It cannot be spread casually - like in litter boxes, water and food bowls, or when snuggling and playing. It is rarely spread from a mother to her kittens.
- The virus can be spread through blood transfusions, badly infected gums, or serious, penetrating bite wounds. (Bite wounds of this kind are extremely rare, except in free-roaming, unneutered tomcats.)
- A neutered cat, in a home, is extremely unlikely to infect other cats, if properly introduced.
- Many vets are not educated about FIV since the virus was only discovered 15 years ago.
- FIV-positive cats should be kept as healthy as possible. Keep them indoors and free from stress, feed them a high-quality diet, keep and treat any secondary problems as soon as they arise.