

FELINE INFECTIOUS PERITONITIS:

Interpretation of a Positive Laboratory Test for FIP Virus Antibody in a Healthy Cat

My cat has tested “positive” for FIP on blood test, but seems healthy. Is it actually sick?

The early signs of FIP disease can be quite vague and may not be obvious. If your cat appears to be in good health and has been examined by a veterinarian, then the “positive” test means only that your cat has been exposed to the virus that can cause FIP. The laboratory test has detected antibodies that your cat has produced against the virus. It does not mean that your cat has FIP unless there are other abnormal laboratory tests or clinical signs present.



Is the virus still present in my cat?

Normally the presence of antibodies means that the virus infection has been cleared, but with the Feline Coronaviruses, the virus may persist even in the presence of antibodies. The test does not tell us if virus is still present in your cat. Some advanced tests are available in specialized laboratories that detect virus particles.

Will my cat develop FIP disease?

It is impossible to predict which cats will develop FIP. There is a risk but many, if not most, cats that test “positive” but are otherwise healthy, live out normal lives.

When might FIP disease occur?

Even if FIP were to develop in your cat, it could be months or even years before clinical signs and symptoms occurred.

What can be done to prevent FIP?

There is a vaccine for FIP but there is no evidence that this would help alter the outcome in a cat that is already positive on antibody testing. It is probably best not to vaccinate a positive cat. Unfortunately, there is nothing that can be done to affect the outcome. It depends on complex factors including genetics, the strain of Feline Coronavirus (most strains are relatively harmless), and so on.

What are the first signs of FIP that I should look out for?

The first signs of FIP may be very vague: listlessness, lethargy, decreased or absent appetite, and variable fever. After a period of several days or a few weeks other signs will develop. The most typical form of FIP is called “wet” FIP and is characterized by the accumulation of fluid in the abdomen giving a bloated appearance, or in the chest cavity resulting in difficulty in breathing. Some cats develop the “dry” form of FIP, which is characterized by inflammation within a variety of organs such as liver, intestine, eyes, and brain, with little to no fluid accumulation in body cavities.

What should I do?

Make sure that your cat is receiving regular veterinary check-ups. Remember that infections with Feline Coronaviruses are common (up to 30% of all cats) but FIP disease is uncommon (less than 1% of cats admitted to veterinary hospitals). Therefore it is quite likely that your cat will not develop FIP disease.

Should I keep my cat away from other cats?

It is not certain that your cat is still carrying virus and therefore it may not be infectious to other cats. Even if your cat is infectious, the strain of virus it is shedding may be a strain that is not normally associated with causing FIP. Also, a high proportion of cats that your cat will come into contact with have already been exposed to strains of Feline Coronavirus. Therefore you should not be unduly concerned about occasional contact with other cats. Because kittens and young cats up to about six months may be more susceptible it would be advisable to prevent contact with that age group. Your veterinarian will discuss the specific recommendations for your cat based on medical history, lifestyle and risk assessment.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Ernest Ward, DVM
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