

Physical Examination and Feline Infectious Peritonitis Vaccine

- Cats tend to hide their illnesses, so physical examination by your veterinarian can help determine if your cat is sick.
- Regular physical examinations are recommended for all pet cats.
- Feline infectious peritonitis (FIP), which is caused by a contagious virus, can be an untreatable, fatal illness in cats.
- Cats housed in group-living situations are at increased risk for exposure to FIP.
- Vaccination can help prevent illness in cats exposed to the FIP virus.

Why Does My Cat Need a Physical Examination?

A thorough physical examination is an important part of routine wellness care for all cats. Cats are very good at hiding their illnesses, so a physical examination may be the only way to determine if your cat is as healthy as he or she seems to be. Even if your cat seems fine and has no evidence of problems, routine physical examinations are important for establishing “normal” values for your cat. For example, subtle changes in weight may only be noticed by comparing your cat’s current weight with readings recorded during previous examinations.

What Happens During a Physical Examination?

A routine physical examination begins by obtaining a medical history from you. Because you live with your cat and observe him or her regularly, your responses to medical history questions provide critical information about your cat’s health. Among other things, your veterinary team may ask questions about your cat’s appetite, litterbox use, and activity level. You should mention any changes in your cat’s lifestyle, diet, or regular routine.

During physical examination, your veterinarian will observe your cat’s overall appearance. Haircoat, skin condition, overall body condition, and overall attitude can change when a cat is ill. Your cat’s weight and vital statistics (temperature, pulse, and respiration) will also be checked. Other parts of a physical examination may include the following:

- Checking the fur for evidence of fleas, ticks, or other skin parasites
- Examining the eyes and ears
- A brief dental examination to assess the gums and teeth (a full dental exam requires sedation)
- Listening to the heart and lungs with a stethoscope to check heart rate/rhythm and lung sounds
- Palpating (feeling) the abdominal organs

Even if a physical examination is very thorough, some medical conditions are not apparent just from physical examination. Your veterinarian may recommend diagnostic testing to screen for other problems. For example, a stool specimen can be used

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to check for intestinal parasites, and blood tests can help detect infections or other medical problems. Your veterinarian may also recommend wellness blood work to help determine if your cat’s major organs are functioning properly.

Depending on which vaccinations your cat receives, these injections are routinely given during physical examination visits.

What Is Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP)?

Feline infectious peritonitis (FIP), which is caused by a contagious virus, can result in significant illness and death in cats. Despite the name of this disease, it does not always cause peritonitis (inflammation of the lining of the abdomen), but this complication happens in a large percentage of infected cats. Once a cat is infected, the virus can spread through the entire body. Complications depend on the type of illness the disease causes and which areas of the body are involved.

How Do Cats Become Infected With Feline Infectious Peritonitis?

The FIP virus is transmitted through exposure to feces from an infected cat. Although cats of any age can become infected with FIP, kittens are most vulnerable. Kittens can become infected shortly after birth if their mother was already infected. Cats in communal living conditions, such as some breeding facilities, catteries, and shelters, are at increased risk for exposure. The FIP virus can live for several weeks on contaminated litterboxes, food bowls, and water bowls. However, the virus is killed by bleach, so cleaning contaminated areas with a dilute bleach solution can decrease the risk of disease spread.

Some cats can become carriers of FIP. This means that after they become infected, they don't develop clinical signs of disease but can be a source of infection for other cats.

Signs of Feline Infectious Peritonitis

There are two forms of FIP, and the clinical signs of the disease depend on which form an infected cat develops. "Wet" FIP describes the form of illness when a cat develops fluid accumulation in certain areas of the body. The fluid develops most commonly in the abdomen or chest cavity, and the amount of fluid can be large enough to cause discomfort and trouble breathing. Other clinical signs can also occur:

- Pain or swelling of the abdomen
- Weight loss
- Pale gums
- Lethargy (tiredness)
- Appetite loss

Cats housed in group-living situations are at increased risk for exposure to FIP.

The "dry" form of the disease occurs when cats develop nodules (lumps) on certain organs in the body. These nodules are not tumors but are the body's response to the infection and inflammation caused by FIP. Nodules can occur in many places, including the liver, lungs, spleen, and brain. Clinical signs can vary, depending on where the nodules form. Clinical signs can include the following:

- Fever
- Weight loss
- Lethargy (tiredness)
- Appetite loss
- Yellow discoloration of the skin (called *jaundice*; can occur if nodules form on the liver)
- Seizures and paralysis
- Inflammation of the eyes
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea or constipation

Diagnosis and Treatment

Depending on the form of illness ("wet" or "dry"), FIP may be difficult to diagnose. Diagnosing the "wet" form can be fairly straightforward. Your veterinarian can remove a small sample of fluid from your cat's abdomen or chest cavity and analyze the fluid for characteristics associated with FIP. Diagnosing the "dry" form can be more complicated. Blood testing can raise your veterinarian's level of suspicion but cannot be used to reliably diagnose the disease in many cases. This is because specific blood tests that detect the FIP virus cannot reliably tell the difference between FIP and other similar viruses. Your veterinarian may recommend additional blood testing, such as a chemistry panel and complete blood cell count (CBC), to check for changes consistent with FIP. Diagnosis is sometimes based on an accumulation of supportive evidence rather than a single test.

No drug can eliminate the FIP virus, and no reliable treatment for FIP is available. Medications

Preventive Care

may temporarily help with clinical signs, but most cats that develop clinical signs eventually die of associated complications.

Vaccination and Prevention

If your cat lives with an FIP-positive cat or is otherwise at risk for exposure to FIP, your veterinarian may recommend the FIP vaccination. Kittens are generally vaccinated against FIP at 16 weeks of age. A booster vaccination is given 3 to 4 weeks later, according to the vaccine label, followed by boosters each year as long as the risk for exposure remains. The vaccine is formulated to be administered as nasal drops, so there is no injection associated with the FIP vaccine. It is normal for cats to sneeze or shake their heads after the vaccination is given.

Cats that live with other cats or are routinely exposed to other cats are at greater risk for exposure to FIP compared with cats in single-cat households

that have limited or no contact with other cats. If your cat's risk for exposure is low, your veterinarian may not recommend the FIP vaccine for your cat. Ask your veterinarian about how to protect your cat from this disease.

Because FIP is transmitted through contact and fecal material, keeping sick cats separated from healthy cats can reduce the likelihood of transmission. The FIP virus is killed by bleach, so litterboxes and food/water bowls can be cleaned with a dilute bleach solution.

Any new kitten or cat being introduced into the home should be examined by a veterinarian as soon as possible and separated from all other household pets for a quarantine period of at least a few weeks. During that time, the new cat should be monitored closely for any signs of illness. Any problems should be reported to your veterinarian before introducing the new cat to your other pets.