Recommendations for FIV Vaccination

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

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In May 2002, we reported the availability of the first vaccine (Fel-O-Vax® FIV) against feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV). The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) has developed the following guidelines regarding the use of the vaccine. The concern is that vaccinated cats will develop antibodies to FIV, and current tests cannot distinguish between cats who are actively infected and those who have received the vaccine.

An additional concern regards the effectiveness of the vaccine. There are five different subtypes of FIV, and the vaccine may not be equally effective in providing protection against all subtypes. Also, in studies prior to licensure of the vaccine, the vaccine was found to protect only 82% of the vaccinated cats. The effectiveness of the vaccine in the "real world" may be even less. This means 18% or more of vaccinated cats could still become infected if exposed to the virus.

Despite these concerns, it should be remembered, that up to 1 in 12 cats in the United States is infected with FIV, which is a serious and often fatal disease. The protection of cats who are at increased risk of infection is important, and a decision on whether or not to vaccinate must be made on an individual basis.

The AAFP recommends that cats who are to be vaccinated with the vaccine should first be tested for FIV and found to be negative. In addition, a cat owner should be informed that after vaccination with FIV, the cat will test positive for the virus, and understand the consequences, including:

- The benefit of testing and isolating FIV-infected cats, the main way of reducing viral transmission, will be diminished if vaccinated cats are erroneously assumed to be non-infectious.

- It will be impossible to ascertain the safety of adopting positive-testing cats into households with uninfected cats. Vaccinating all the residents prior to adoption may provide some protection, but it is unrealistic to expect all vaccinates to be protected.

- Because infected cats, either healthy or ill, will be difficult to identify, the delivery of the specialized care they require will be significantly compromised.

- Kittens born to vaccinated queens will likely test positive for passively acquired FIV antibody. According to studies conducted by the manufacturer, however, antibody levels drop to levels that will not interfere with test results by the time kittens reach 8 weeks-of-age.

- Some shelters and other facilities designed to house stray cats often euthanize cats with positive FIV test results, so previously vaccinated uninfected cats may needlessly undergo euthanasia. Permanently identifying cats vaccinated with Fel-O-Vax® FIV (e.g.; using a microchip or tattoo) has been suggested as a means of identifying vaccinated cats, thus sparing them from euthanasia. Yet previous vaccination does not rule out infection nor prevent the subsequent placement of infected cats.

Conclusion of the AAFP

The absence of tests that distinguish cats vaccinated with Fel-O-Vax® FIV from infected cats, coupled with questions regarding the vaccine's ability to induce protection against all the subtypes and strains of FIV to which cats might be exposed, makes the decision to recommend use of this product far from straightforward. It is crucial that cat owners are adequately informed about the vaccine's impact on future test results, and their decision should be reached only after careful consideration of both positive and negative implications. If the decision ultimately falls in favor of vaccination, cats should test negative immediately prior to receiving Fel-O-Vax® FIV.