Panleukopenia Kills Hundreds of Cats in Michigan

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A virus that health officials say is easily preventable has killed as many as 800 cats in Michigan’s Saginaw County. The panleukopenia outbreak has prompted officials to strongly recommend that all felines be kept indoors, according to a report in the Saginaw News.

Panleukopenia is caused by a virus that kills rapidly dividing white blood cells, thus making the cat more susceptible to other complications and bacterial infections. Kittens are especially vulnerable because of their immature immune systems.

Dr. Nancy Frank, acting state veterinarian, said, "[Panleukopenia] usually shows up in animal shelters, where there are a lot of stray cats brought in without their shots." But the weather has been mild and humid, leading officials to suspect that people are leaving their cats outdoors more often.

Mark Wachner, director of Saginaw’s Animal Care Center, told the News that the virus can be prevented through normal vaccinations.

"Cats are among the most neglected domestic animals in the country," he said. "You have people saying, 'He’s just an outdoors cat,’ but they need regular examinations, too."

Comments from our Veterinary Staff:

Panleukopenia has a number of different names:

- Panleukopenia ("Panleuk")
- FPV (Feline Panleukopenia Virus or Feline Parvo Virus)
- FP (Feline Panleukopenia)
- Feline Distemper
- Feline Infectious Enteritis
- Feline Infectious Gastroenteritis
- Feline Agranulocytosis
- Cat Plague or Cat Fever

Panleukopenia is a very severe infection, and, at one time, was referred to as "Cat Plague," because infections would nearly wipe out cat populations in certain geographical areas. This is a highly contagious and severe parvovirus, affecting the gastrointestinal, immune, and nervous systems, and it has several strains. The disease affects almost any feline, including domestic cats and kittens, as well as lions, bobcats, and tigers. The fatality rate in susceptible cats/kittens is 50-90 percent.

This outbreak of panleukopenia highlights the need to keep all cats up-to-date on their vaccinations, and to keep cats indoors. For more information on panleukopenia, click here.