

FELINE (DISTEMPER) PANLEUKOPENIA

What is distemper?

Distemper is an old term that has been used for a feline disease, based on a somewhat similar disease in dogs. However, it is more properly known as Feline Panleukopenia. The word “panleukopenia” means a decrease in the number of all of the white blood cells. The feline disease, “Panleukopenia,” is a disease that causes the white blood cell count to fall far below normal. Since white blood cells are important in defending a cat against infections and disease, this makes the cat very vulnerable to other infections. In addition to causing a low white blood cell count, this disease also causes severe damage to the lining of the stomach and intestines.

What is the cause?

Panleukopenia is caused by a virus of the Parvovirus family. It is related to the virus that causes Parvo in dogs, which also has similar clinical signs.

How is the infection transmitted?

The virus is shed in all body secretions, particularly feces, of infected cats. It can be ingested directly or transferred to a susceptible cat via contaminated water, feed bowls, or even on shoes. The incubation period from infection until clinical signs develop is typically 3 to 5 days, seldom longer than a week.

What are the clinical signs?

There is some variation, but typically cats experience a very deep depression or listlessness which may progress to collapse. Vomiting and diarrhea are frequent, and the diarrhea may be watery and contain blood. The hair coat quickly becomes dull and rough, and the skin loses its elasticity due to dehydration. Often cats with panleukopenia have other infections because their immune system is compromised.

Can the cat be treated?

As for most viral diseases, there is no specific treatment that kills the virus. However, the secondary infections that usually occur are treated with antibiotics. Dehydration and shock are life-threatening components of panleukopenia; intravenous fluid therapy and intense nursing is critical to control them. Drugs are also given to control vomiting and diarrhea. Some cats do not recover from this disease, but many will if aggressive supportive therapy is given.

How can I protect my cat against panleukopenia?

Fortunately excellent vaccines are available and are routinely recommended by veterinarians as part of a vaccination program. The immunity conferred by panleukopenia vaccine is generally strong and long-lasting, but it decreases with time. Therefore, annual boosters are highly recommended.

Is there any long-term consequences for the cat?

No. Once the virus runs its course, the lining of the stomach and intestines recovers quickly without scarring. In addition, the bone marrow produces new white blood cells to replace those that were lost. The cat recovers completely.

How do I disinfect my house?

Since the panleukopenia virus is difficult to kill, most disinfectants are not effective. We recommend 1 cup of chlorine bleach per gallon of water as the best way to kill the virus. Be careful not to bleach your furniture, carpet, or other flooring material with it.