FELINE INFECTIOUS ANAEMIA

What causes feline infectious anaemia (FIA)?

FIA is caused by a tiny, microscopic bacterial parasite which attacks the cat's red blood cells within the circulation. It is called *Haemobartonella felis*. The damaged cells may die or be destroyed at an increased rate by the spleen, leading to anaemia.

How would an owner recognise FIA in the cat?

Cats are very good at hiding anaemia until it is quite severe. The earliest indication may be pallor of the mucous membranes - the conjunctiva (lining of the eye), gums and tongue appear white or pale instead of the normal pink colour. It can be difficult to assess the mucous membranes in some cats - occasionally they may normally appear rather pale and there are causes of pallor other than anaemia. As the anaemia becomes more severe the cat may become lethargic and breathless if stressed or after any exertion. In FIA there may be loss of condition, poor appetite, weight loss and occasionally high temperature, occasionally jaundice is seen - usually only in very severe, acute cases.

How is FIA diagnosed?

Diagnosis of FIA is difficult and depends on identifying the tiny organisms microscopically on specially prepared and stained blood films. It is so small that it is difficult to recognise particularly if it is present in very low numbers. Diagnosis is also hampered by other problems. In particular the parasite is sometimes found on blood cells of normal cats with no anaemia. Finding FIA in a cat without anaemia would not necessarily be considered significant. There are also many other possible causes of anaemia in cats other than FIA, and therefore identifying it in an anaemic cat may not necessarily mean that other causes of anaemia may not also be involved. You can see, therefore, that diagnosis of FIA is very problematic.

Can FIA be treated?

Treatment of FIA can be difficult since no drugs can be relied upon to eliminate the parasite. Nevertheless there are a variety of different drugs which can be used to control FIA in the majority of cases. Some other diseases may also be present in cats with FIA and it is thought that the effects of other diseases, including stress, may be important in enabling FIA to cause disease successful treatment may depend on resolving any other disease problems the cat is showing. In severe cases where the cat becomes very weak a blood transfusion may be life saving.
Does a diagnosis of FIA have any implications for my other cats?

Although FIA is a disease caused by an infectious agent, it may not prove to be a problem in other cats living in the same household. The way it is spread between cats is not certain. Cat bites and fleas may spread the parasite but other methods may be involved. Fighting therefore represents a risk of spread of infection. Flea infestations should be treated - indeed the presence of fleas may make anaemia of any cause more severe. Even if your other cats do become infected this may well not result in any anaemia or other problems.