



Kitten Tutor™: The ABC's of Panleukopenia

Panleukopenia is a word that those of us who work in the veterinary and animal welfare worlds cringe to hear. Breaking down the word gives more insight into what it entails. *Pan*, meaning "all"; *leuk*, or "white blood cell", and *penia*, or "deficiency in, or lack of". Feline parvovirus (FPV), colloquially known as the feline distemper virus, is the causative agent of feline panleukopenia. Briefly, FPV attacks and kills cells that are actively dividing, including white blood cells and intestinal cells. Multiple body systems are affected by the disease resulting in an inability to fight off infection.

In general, the disease has been well controlled by routine vaccination, but it can spread easily and widely in unvaccinated populations. It most commonly infects young, unvaccinated kittens.

How to spot it. Signs of panleukopenia in a kitten include lethargy, inappetence, fever, vomiting and diarrhea. An infected kitten may separate itself from the litter. These signs can be subtle in early stages of the disease, and in some cases the kitten can die very abruptly. If you notice any of these signs, report them to your veterinarian immediately so they can begin diagnostics and supportive care. Remember, kittens do not just "fade" away – panleukopenia could be the reason, and early intervention is essential for saving a kitten's life.

How to keep it from spreading. Feline parvovirus is effectively in every environment, and most kittens and cats are exposed to it during their lifetime. FPV is usually spread via the fecal/urine-oral route, as well as through nasal secretions and can be carried on hands and clothing. It is a hardy virus, and without thorough removal of organic matter and subsequent disinfection, it can last in the environment a year or more. Foster homes and shelters should take great care in implementing an appropriate cleaning protocol to prevent the spread of disease. Isolation protocols should be in place as well because infected kittens can shed the virus even before they appear clinically ill.

Early recognition of the illness and immediate supportive interventions can prove to be life-saving. Prevention of panleukopenia is possible through managed intake, appropriate vaccination schedules, and stringent cleaning and disinfection protocols.

The University of Wisconsin and the University of California-Davis's Shelter Medicine Program offers a comprehensive guidebook for shelters, rescues, and veterinary clinics to use to combat this disease. Here's the link: <https://www.uwsheltermedicine.com/library/guidebooks/feline-panleukopenia>

NKC offers Kitten Tutor™ handouts free to anyone interested in saving kittens. We are a 501(c)(3) and teach shelters, rescues, foster families and the veterinary community how to save more kittens. To learn more, visit: www.kittencoalition.org. © 2020 National Kitten Coalition