



FELINE PANLEUKOPENIA, by Dr. Theresa Gregory



Feline panleukopenia, often known as feline distemper, is a deadly but very preventable viral disease of cats. The name "distemper" is actually a misnomer, as this virus has no relation to the canine distemper virus. It is actually closely related to the canine parvovirus.

Feline panleukopenia can cause high fever, severe lethargy, vomiting, diarrhea, and severe dehydration. The virus attacks the cells in the kitten's body that are growing the most rapidly. This includes the cells that line the intestinal mucosa, which causes severe GI ulcerations. The onset of the disease can be rapid, often young kittens are found dead with no previous clinical signs noticed by their caretakers. Pregnant cats that are infected and survive may have kittens that have severe neurological problems.

Treatment consists of supportive care. A cat or kitten that is showing any of the above signs should be evaluated by a veterinarian as soon as possible. Hospitalization with IV fluids, antibiotics to prevent secondary infections, and medications to help control the nausea and diarrhea offer the best chance for survival in infected cats, but there are no medications to directly fight the virus and many cats will die even with appropriate care.

This virus is spread in feces and other body secretions from infected to healthy cats. The virus is stable in the environment and very widespread. There are no areas that can be assumed to be free of this disease.

As scary as the thought of panleukopenia is, the disease is easily preventable with routine vaccinations. Regular "kitten shots" include the vaccine that will protect most animals from this disease. Check with your veterinarian for the recommended vaccine schedule to prevent this life-threatening disease.