HEMOBARTONELLOSIS
(FELINE INFECTIOUS ANEMIA)

What is feline Infectious Anemia?

Feline Infectious Anemia (FIA) is a relatively uncommon infection of cat red blood cells by a microscopic parasite. The destruction of the infected red blood cells results in anemia. Anemia is a medical term referring to a reduction in the numbers of red blood cells (erythrocytes) or in the quantity of the blood pigment, and oxygen-carrying protein, called hemoglobin, in the blood.

What causes feline infectious anemia (FIA)?

FIA is caused by a tiny, microscopic parasite that attaches itself to the surface of the cat's red blood. The parasite is called Hemobartonella felis and is a member of the Protozoa. The infected blood cells may die directly or be treated as “foreign” by the cat’s immune system and destroyed. If enough cells are infected and destroyed the result is anemia.

What are the signs of FIA?

The anemia may be mild, at least early in the infection, and not cause any obvious signs. Many cases of Hemobartonella infection in cats go undetected. Some of these subclinical cases remain long-term carriers of the disease. Later in life, some other infection such as feline leukemia may lower the cat’s immunity and then FIA may occur.

When enough red cells are destroyed, symptomatic anemia occurs. The mucous membranes, readily observed in the conjunctiva of the eyes, or the gums, will be pale to white (or even yellowish if there is some jaundice present). Because the oxygen carrying capacity of the blood is decreased the cat may tire quickly, be generally weak and depressed, and may begin losing weight.

How is FIA diagnosed?

There are many reasons for a cat to be anemic, and even if Hemobartonella is detected it may not be the sole cause. A full clinical examination with diagnostic blood tests will be needed. The organism is detected microscopically by its characteristic form on the surface of stained red blood cells. It is a very small organism and can be difficult to observe especially when relatively few red cells are infected. The proportion of infected cells can fluctuate from day to day. Because the organism can sometimes be found in normal cats, the mere detection of Hemobartonella does not confirm a diagnosis of FIA and other possible causes of the anemia should not be overlooked.
Can FIA be treated?

*Hemobartonella* is destroyed by some of the broad-spectrum antibiotics such as tetracyclines. In some cases, after an initial good response there may be relapse and the organism can persist in sites protected from the antibiotic. It is important not to end the course of antibiotics before completed. If another disease is present, this must also be addressed. If an immune-mediated disease is suspected, immune-suppressive drugs such as corticosteroids may be used. If the anemia is very severe, a blood transfusion may be required.

How could my cat get FIA and are my other cats at risk?

The major means of transmission is thought to be biting, blood-sucking parasites such as fleas. Direct cat to cat transmission or by contaminated food bowls and litter-trays seems unlikely. Even if there are other cats in the household they may remain uninfected, or at least symptom free. However, the bite from an infected cat may spread the infection. The incubation period may be as long as 7 weeks (two weeks is more usual) so the source of the infection may be difficult to determine. The way it is spread between cats is not fully understood.

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