

Living proof that
forever homes
are more than
possible for
FIV-positive cats



Getting positive



BY LIZ FINCH



Smokey



Smokey with his sister, Birdie Blue.

THE FRONT PORCH OF AN abandoned trailer was the grizzled gray tomcat's chosen hangout. He could have been sizing up potential rivals for food or looking for females. Or he could've been waiting for his long-gone family to return. At any rate, the location was an excellent place to monitor the campground he called home.

Troy Lea first noticed the cat she called Smokey when she and her mother approached the year-round residents of the southern Missouri campground about getting their community cats spayed or neutered. As it turned out, people were more than happy to help control the population of stray cats, whom they loved and accepted as part of their neighborhood.

They liked all the cats — that is, except for Smokey. He was heavily scarred, with ears that were torn and crumpled from years of fighting, and his rough looks tended to frighten people or, at the very least, made him unlikely to garner much in the way of cuddles.

"People told me to stay away from him because he was mean," says Troy, a specialist with Best Friends' No More Homeless Pets Network. Instead, she gained his trust by

sitting quietly on his porch and feeding him. One day she patted her outstretched legs and, much to her delight, Smokey immediately climbed into her lap. "He was drooling and purring and rolling over for belly rubs," she remembers. "In that moment, I knew one thing: Smokey was never going to have to scrounge for food — or love — ever again."

Troy's first task was to get Smokey a veterinary exam, which revealed numerous health problems. He was infested with worms and parasites, had really bad teeth and a grade-three heart murmur, and was suffering from a urinary tract infection, as well as eye and ear infections. And Smokey also tested positive for feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV).

FIV: Facts and myths

Like Smokey, FIV can be gravely misunderstood. While FIV damages the immune system, making it challenging for an infected cat to fight off even common infections such as upper respiratory illness, it need not be a prognosis for social outcast status. Contrary to what many people have believed for far too long, FIV-positive cats can lead active, full, wonderful lives in loving homes. Best Friends' medical director, Dr. Susan Konecny, says, "At the end of the day, an FIV

diagnosis is not something we need to fear automatically. It is not passed from cat to cat by casual contact."

Despite the fact that the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is from the same family of viruses as FIV, and causes a similar unrelenting destruction of the immune system, few other parallels exist between these illnesses. Furthermore, it is impossible for a human to "catch" FIV from a cat, just as it is not possible for cats to "catch" HIV from a human. "It is not zoonotic, meaning 'passed to humans,'" Susan explains. "It is a disease about which we need to educate pet owners and the general public, so as not to propagate myths."

There are actually few avenues for cats to become infected with FIV. The virus can't survive for long outside the body, so — despite a host of misconceptions — sharing toys, food, water and litter is not

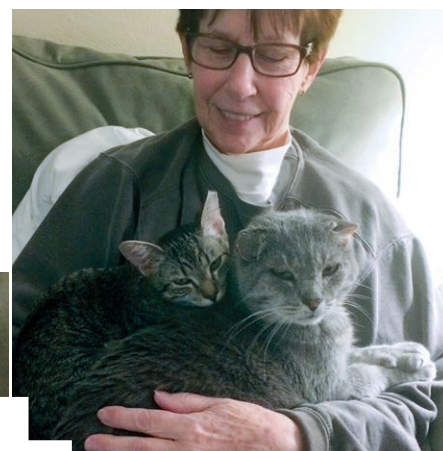
"An FIV diagnosis is *not* something we need to fear automatically."

~ Dr. Susan Konecny

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Smokey cuddles up with Troy's mom, Judy Turner.



PHOTOS OF JUDY TURNER COURTESY OF TROY LEA

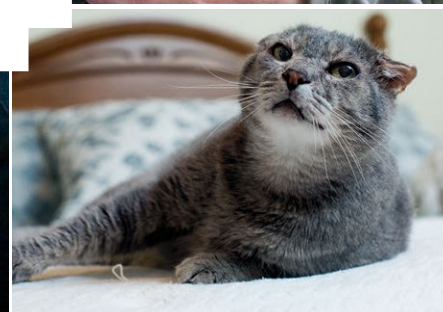


PHOTO BY LYNN TERRY

a means of transmission. Kittens can be infected from their mothers, but even this occurs infrequently.

By far, FIV is most common in unaltered males who live outdoors and engage in fights with other cats. (And this, of course, is the camp Smokey fell into.) The kind of deep bite wounds inflicted in such fights are optimum routes for infection, since they allow the FIV-positive cat's saliva to mingle with the FIV-negative cat's blood. That's why one of the first things Troy did once Smokey had a clean bill of health was to have him neutered — a procedure that often helps deter aggressive behavior in male cats.

Positive news indeed

While unsubstantiated myths about FIV have permeated the mainstream, veterinary studies pummel those false beliefs. Simply put, medical evidence has long provided the scientific support that outlines the possible — and not so possible — transmission routes mentioned above. In fact, a recent study takes it a step further. The eight-year study, which wrapped in 2014 and was conducted by Dr. Annette Litster, associate professor at Purdue University and former director of Maddie's Shelter Medicine Program, provides

evidence to support the idea of cats of different viral statuses living with one another, under the same roof. In short, the study indicates that FIV-positive cats can live in the same house as FIV-negative cats without spreading the virus.

Under the auspices of both those entities — Purdue University and Maddie's Shelter Medicine Program, which funds research that advances the practice of animal sheltering — Annette's study monitored 45 FIV-negative and five FIV-positive cohabiting, spayed or neutered cats for any change in their viral status. Even though each FIV-negative cat was exposed to FIV-infected cats for an average accumulated time of nearly 12 years, not a single viral transmission occurred. Among a separate group of five FIV-positive moms with 19 kittens, Annette again found no evidence of viral transmission.

Scientific evidence showing that friendly cats don't pose a huge risk of transmitting the virus to one another also lends support to the observation that cats who fight do pose such a risk. It's not surprising that an unneutered male cat with obvious signs of a life spent battling other cats — a cat like Smokey — could be described as something of a "poster child" for the common beliefs surrounding FIV.

Just because a cat looks like he might be

FIV-positive doesn't mean he is, however. The standard test for the virus is called the ELISA (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay), otherwise known as a SNAP test. SNAP tests are very accurate for detecting antibodies to FIV using only a small amount of blood, and can be performed in a veterinarian's office in just a few minutes.

Turning the tide

When FIV was first discovered in 1986, veterinarians recommended immediate euthanasia for any cat testing positive. Sadly, for some FIV-positive cats, the situation hasn't changed even 30 years later.

"I see many shelter leaders who are still facing resistance from veterinary staff around adopting out FIV-positive cats," says Cameron Moore, project manager of Target Zero, an organization that mentors shelters and animal welfare groups in their quest to eliminate the killing of all adoptable shelter animals. "Those staff either aren't necessarily up to speed with the latest studies, or maybe just feel more comfortable with putting positive cats down or keeping them isolated."

"There are veterinarians who still believe all FIV-positive cats can only be singly housed or should be euthanized," echoes





“Her friendly, confident and **quirky personality has surfaced** and she is finally in a place where people will see her as what she is — a normal, healthy kitty.”

~ Michelle Warfle,
Best Friends Cat
World manager



At Best Friends' Cat World, Symphony takes a break on a walk with caregiver Katie Kyzivat.



Symphony has a chat with caregiver Rachel Cartee.

Overall, more FIV-positive cats are being saved now, compared to years past.



Troy Lea and Smokey

PHOTO COURTESY OF TROY LEA

Susan. “Veterinarians who are familiar with Annette’s study, however, are no longer offering that advice and are supportive of mixed households where the cats peacefully coexist.”

At Best Friends, determining which cats can peacefully coexist is part of standard protocol. All FIV-positive cats start off housed in rooms with only other FIV-positive cats. As caregivers get to know the cats’ personalities, they identify those who will do well in a room with cats who aren’t FIV-positive. When a cat moves into a non-FIV room, it opens up a spot for an FIV-positive cat to be admitted. “This policy allows us to save more cats,” Susan says.

Overall, more FIV-positive cats are now being saved, compared to years past. Cameron notes, “The tide is turning at more progressive shelters, which are doing well placing them.”

It’s a trend familiar to Karen Green, executive director of Cat Adoption Team (CAT) in Sherwood, Oregon. CAT changed its adoption policies around FIV-positive cats as a direct result of Annette’s study and is finding that other groups are doing the same. “The groups we normally take FIV-positive cats from are having much better luck placing the cats themselves,” Karen says. “Our FIV room was actually used for other cats several times during the year because we had no FIV-positive cats coming in.”

In more good news, Dakin Humane Society in Springfield, Massachusetts, is an open-admission shelter that has been placing FIV-positive cats into homes for more than 10 years. “Dakin’s mission is to provide a home for every healthy, adoptable animal and FIV-positive cats are certainly included in that effort,” says Lee Chambers, Dakin’s

marketing and communications manager. “They’re pretty much regular cats.” Regular cats who are capable of living long lives, Lee notes, as evidenced by a 19-year-old FIV-positive girl named Fuzzy who was recently adopted into a home with other cats and dogs. “She also has become special friends with a 130-pound Newfoundland,” Lee says.

Living together in harmony

The process of integrating an FIV-positive cat into your home and acclimating her to her new surroundings is not much different than with any other cat. Quite simply, ease into it. And, while it goes without saying, the FIV-positive cat should be one who has demonstrated an ability to live harmoniously with other cats.

A gradual introduction process and long-term monitoring are vital steps in mixing FIV-positive and FIV-negative cats. And good stress management can effectively prevent aggressive outbursts. One useful tool in that regard is pet pheromone products, which mimic a cat’s natural calming chemical and come in various forms, including plug-in diffusers and collars. These and other products can reduce episodes of aggression, though sometimes discovering what reduces a particular cat’s stress can take some experimentation.

In the case of a seven-year-old FIV-positive cat named Symphony, who came to Best Friends from Michigan Animal Rescue League after being passed over repeatedly by adopters, the way to manage her initial grouchiness turned out to be a little outdoor time. “She clearly wasn’t crazy about other cats, but she loves going for walks on a

harness and leash,” says Michelle Warfle, Cat World manager. “As soon as she gets outside, she kneads the air with her feet, rolls in the dirt, and kicks up clouds of it.”

Symphony is now thriving in a room with several other cats. “Her friendly, confident and quirky personality has surfaced and she is finally in a place where people will see her as what she is — a normal, healthy kitty,” Michelle says.

As for Smokey, the “mean” campground cat? Troy found herself unable to part with him, so he lives with her and seven FIV-negative cats. Not only did Smokey seamlessly integrate himself into the household, his behavior since Troy took him in has hardly fit the stereotype of a feuding FIV-positive boy. “He is the best foster daddy,” Troy says. “He has welcomed every foster kitten with cuddles and kisses, taught them manners, and kept them clean. He would even lie still as they crawled all over him and chewed on his tail.”

In that sense, maybe Smokey should be the “poster child” for the realities of FIV, with a caption that reads, “Formerly misunderstood FIV-positive street cat blossoms as a nurturing parental figure for FIV-negative kittens.”

At the end of the day, perhaps Target Zero’s Cameron Moore says it best: “We need more positive messaging out there about these cats. It’s all about removing the fear and not making it seem like they are defective, or doomed to a short life.” 🐾

Learn more about FIV:
bestfriends.org/resources/cats