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Feline Infectious Peritonitis: Updating Our Understanding of Transmission and Diagnosis

Feline infectious peritonitis (FIP) remains a challenging disease in feline medicine. Although our understanding of its pathogenesis and diagnosis has advanced significantly, misconceptions persist regarding its contagiousness and the interpretation of feline coronavirus testing.

Two important points deserve clarification: **FIP is not ordinarily transmitted directly between cats, and neither coronavirus antibody titers nor fecal PCR testing can diagnose FIP or predict which cats will develop the disease.**

Feline Coronavirus Is Contagious; FIP Generally Is Not

Feline coronavirus (FCoV) is common, particularly in multi-cat environments, and spreads primarily through the fecal-oral route. Most infected cats remain healthy or experience mild gastrointestinal signs.

In a small percentage of infected cats, viral changes and host immune factors contribute to the development of FIP. Current evidence indicates that FIP generally develops within an individual infected cat rather than through direct transmission of the disease from another cat. Although rare exceptions involving transmission of FIP-associated viral strains have been documented, these do not represent the usual epidemiology of FIP.

A cat diagnosed with FIP should not routinely be considered a direct infectious threat to other cats in its household.

Healthy housemates have often already been exposed to the same circulating coronavirus. Clients should not routinely be advised to isolate a cat with FIP, remove healthy cats from the household, or avoid adopting another cat solely because of an FIP diagnosis.

Good litter box hygiene, reduced overcrowding, and routine sanitation remain appropriate measures for limiting coronavirus transmission.

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Coronavirus Antibody Titers Do Not Diagnose FIP

Coronavirus antibody testing, sometimes referred to as an "FIP titer," detects antibodies against FCoV. It cannot reliably distinguish common enteric coronavirus infection from FIP. A positive titer indicates coronavirus exposure and an immune response, **not that a cat has FIP or will develop it.** Even very high titers are not diagnostic, and a negative titer does not definitively exclude FIP.

Although serology may have limited applications in assessing coronavirus exposure within populations, routine antibody testing of healthy cats to determine their FIP status or future risk is not supported by current diagnostic guidelines.

Fecal PCR Testing Cannot Diagnose FIP

Fecal RT-PCR detects coronavirus RNA shed through the gastrointestinal tract. A positive result indicates viral shedding, not FIP.

Healthy cats commonly shed FCoV, particularly in multi-cat households. Shedding may be intermittent, so a negative result does not guarantee that a cat is free of infection or will not shed coronavirus later.

Fecal PCR cannot reliably distinguish routine enteric coronavirus infection from the systemic infection associated with FIP. While useful in selected circumstances for evaluating coronavirus shedding within populations, **fecal PCR should not be used to diagnose FIP, predict its development, or determine whether a healthy cat should remain in a household.**

Routine testing of asymptomatic housemates following an FIP diagnosis is generally unnecessary.

Appropriate Diagnosis and Client Recommendations

Diagnosing FIP requires consideration of clinical signs, laboratory abnormalities, imaging, and targeted testing of affected tissues or body cavity effusions.

Findings supporting FIP may include persistent fever, weight loss, hyperglobulinemia, a decreased albumin-to-globulin ratio, characteristic effusions, and ocular or neurologic abnormalities. Coronavirus RT-PCR testing of effusions or affected tissues, along with immunostaining and histopathology when appropriate, can provide important diagnostic evidence.

No single routine screening test reliably diagnoses or excludes FIP in every patient. Veterinarians should communicate the following key points to clients:

- FCoV infection is common, and most infected cats never develop FIP.
- FIP is generally not directly contagious between cats.
- Positive coronavirus antibody titers or fecal PCR results do not diagnose FIP.
- Neither test reliably predicts whether a healthy cat will develop FIP.
- Healthy housemates generally do not require isolation, extensive testing, or removal from the household.

Euthanasia, permanent segregation, or relinquishment of otherwise healthy cats should not be recommended solely because of positive coronavirus test results or exposure to a cat with FIP.

Conclusion

Understanding the distinction between common, transmissible feline coronavirus infection and the development of FIP is essential to appropriate veterinary care.
Accurate interpretation of coronavirus antibody titers and fecal PCR results can prevent unnecessary testing, misdiagnosis, and potentially harmful client recommendations.
As effective antiviral treatments become increasingly available, maintaining current, evidence-based approaches to FIP diagnosis and client education is more important than ever.

References

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