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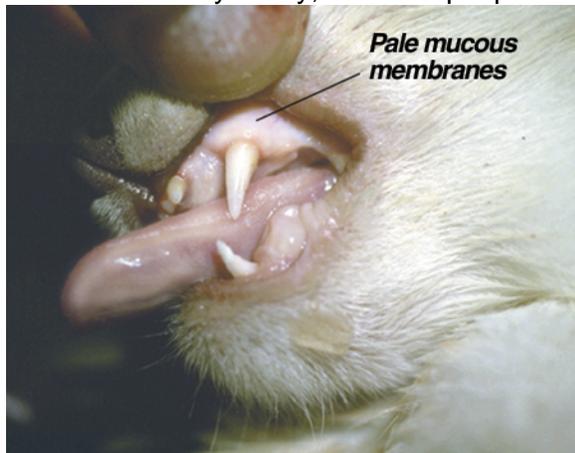
Hemobartonellosis (Feline Infectious Anemia)

What is Feline Infectious Anemia?

Feline Infectious Anemia (FIA) is a relatively uncommon infection of cats, in which their red blood cells are infected by a microscopic blood parasite. The subsequent 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 hemoglobin, which carries oxygen.

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 cell. This parasite is a member of the protozoan family, and is called *Hemobartonella felis*. The infected blood cells may break down when infected or may be treated as "foreign" by the cat's immune system and destroyed. If enough red blood 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 cats remain long-term carriers of the disease and

unknowingly spread the disease to other cats. Later in life, some other infection such as feline leukemia may lower the cat's immunity and FIA may become clinically evident.

When enough red cells are destroyed, symptomatic anemia occurs. The mucous membranes, readily observed in the conjunctival lining of the eyes and the gums, will be pale to white or even yellowish if there is some jaundice or icterus present. Because the oxygen carrying capacity of the blood is decreased the cat may fatigue quickly, overall be 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 actual cause of the anemia. A full clinical examination with blood and urine tests will be needed to diagnose FIA. The blood parasite 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 response to antibiotic treatment, there may be relapse and the organism can persist in sites protected from the antibiotic. It is important to give the full course of antibiotics to the patient. If another disease is present, this must also be addressed and treated. If an immune-mediated disease is suspected, immunosuppressive drugs such as corticosteroids may be used. If the anemia is very severe, a blood transfusion may be required.

How is FIA transmitted and are my other cats at risk?

The major transmission route of FIA 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 seven weeks although a two week incubation period is more normal. Due to this long incubation period, the actual source of the infection may be difficult to determine. Since the way it is spread between cats is not fully understood, good hygienic practices should be followed.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Ernest Ward, DVM
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