

Feral Cat Medical Issues

This fact sheet is intended to provide a basic overview of feral cat medical issues. It should not be used to diagnose an animal, nor is it intended to provide veterinary advice. For more information on these issues, or if your cat is injured or sick, please consult a veterinarian.

Feral cats do not experience significantly more or worse medical issues than do housecats. In fact, feral cats may actually be healthier as a population than domestic pet cats. This is because feral kittens will develop natural immunity to a variety of illnesses. Nonetheless, prevention and early treatment of medical problems play an important role in helping all cats to live long, healthy lives.

Some people believe that feral cats lead "short, miserable lives" and that for this reason, Trap, Alter, Return programs should not be implemented. We disagree. As most any caregiver can attest, feral cats frequently live long, healthy lives.

And while feral and abandoned cats may face hardships, we don't think death is better than a less-than-perfect life. Many animals, such as raccoons, foxes, field mice, and others, face similar hazards and do not live extraordinarily long lives, yet we would never consider euthanizing them "for their own good."

We believe that all animals deserve compassion and protection for their entire lives—no matter how long that might be.

Prevention

- Spay/neuter improves cat health and behavior and eliminates the risk of certain types of cancer. Cats who are altered at The SF/SPCA Feral Fix Program also receive a medical exam, standard vaccinations, and treatment for certain medical conditions (including many of those listed below).
- Feed the cats regularly (dry food is important for dental health) and provide fresh water. Keep dishes clean.

Treatment

- If you notice anything unusual such as eye discharge, limping, or sudden unexplained weight loss, take the cat to a veterinarian. For tips on catching sick cats, see The SF/SPCA fact sheet "Humane Trapping." If your regular veterinarian does not treat feral cats, call other caregivers or feral cat organizations for referrals. The SF/SPCA Hospital treats feral cats by appointment.
- Depending on the nature of the illness or injury, the cat may stay in the hospital, return home for further treatment, or may be returned directly to his habitat. If you will be treating the feral cat at home, you should have a large cage, such as a dog kennel or crate, in which to confine him. Provide a small litterbox and plastic food or water dishes. Follow your veterinarian's instructions for administering medication. Even if treatment is lengthy, a cat can be returned to her colony once she has recovered.

- Feral cats may be harder to treat than most pet cats, but do not be discouraged from seeking veterinary care. Long-lasting injections, liquid medications, crushed pills, and other methods are available to make treatment as easy as possible. And the minor stress of confinement and treatment is well worth it—remember, you are helping to save a life!

Definitions

- Abscess: A puncture wound that closes over on the surface of the skin while infection spreads below the surface. If an abscess opens, you will notice blood, pus, and a bad smell. Otherwise you may see a lump under the fur anywhere on the body. An untreated abscess can spread infection throughout the body.
- Ear mites: Microscopic parasites that irritate and inflame the ear.
- Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) and Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV): Feline diseases of the immune system. FIV is transmitted cat-to-cat via biting, and FeLV is transmitted cat-to-cat via saliva or from mother to kitten. Many cats remain asymptomatic while in others, secondary infections may develop. FIV and FeLV affect less than 2-4% of the feral cat population—lower than in domestic pet cats. By stopping breeding and fighting, spay/neuter further reduces the incidence of these diseases.
- Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP): A viral disease which many cats (domestic and feral) are exposed to but that few develop. There is no reliable test or vaccine.
- Flea allergy: Some cats have a severe allergic response to flea bites, resulting in hair loss, scabs, and/or severe itching. In most cases, eliminating fleas greatly reduces symptoms. Flea infestation in kittens can also lead to life-threatening anemia.
- Gestation: A cat is pregnant for approximately 64 days.
- Gingivitis: Gum disease. It can be a secondary infection of FeLV or FIV, or can occur on its own. Symptoms include swollen gums, loose teeth, oversalivation, and difficulty eating. Left untreated, it can become life threatening.
- Lactation: Mother cats produce milk until kittens are weaned at approximately four to seven weeks of age. Lactating females should not be spayed until the kittens are weaned.
- Lice: You may notice the eggs, which look like sawdust but cannot be brushed off the kitten's fur. Lice often requires repeated treatment with special shampoos available from your veterinarian.
- Ringworm: A fungal skin infection. A veterinarian should check suspicious lesions. When handling a cat suspected of having ringworm, you should wear gloves.
- Distemper (Feline Panleukopenia): Distemper is relatively rare in feral cats—most have developed a natural immunity. Most cat vaccinations (including those given at The SF/SPCA Feral Fix Program) include a component to prevent distemper.
- Roundworms and tapeworms: Intestinal parasites. Some cats are asymptomatic, or you may notice worms in cat droppings.
- Upper respiratory infection (URI): A viral infection similar to the flu in humans. Symptoms may include nose and/or eye discharge, noisy breathing, and/or sneezing. URI can lead to secondary infections and in some cases can become life threatening if untreated.

For More Information on Medical Issues

- SF/SPCA Feral Cat *Medical Issues* video.
- Cat Fanciers Association at www.cfainc.org.
- Pet First Aid courses are offered by Fast Response at (800) 637-7378 and the American Red Cross (telephone your local chapter for more information).

SF/SPCA Resources

- Fact sheets including "The Care and Feeding of Feral Cats," "Humane Trapping," "Post-Surgery Recovery Care," "Basic Kitten Care," and more.
- Lifeline for Feral Cats (415) 554-3071. We can provide advice specific to your situation.
- Feral Cat Video Series, including *Medical Issues* and *Handling and Treating Feral Cats* (for veterinarians).
- The SF/SPCA Feral Fix Program provides free spay/neuter for San Francisco feral cats, no appointment necessary.