What is Feline Immunodeficiency Virus?
Virologists classify feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) as a lentivirus (or "slow virus"). FIV is in the same retrovirus family as feline leukemia virus (FeLV), but the viruses differ in many ways including their shape, size, and composition. The specific ways in which they cause disease differ, as well.

How common is the infection?
FIV-infected cats are found worldwide, but the prevalence of infection varies greatly. In the United States, approximately 1.5 to 3 percent of healthy cats are infected with FIV. Because biting is the most efficient means of viral transmission, free-roaming, aggressive male cats are the most frequently infected, while cats housed exclusively indoors are much less likely to be infected.

How is FIV spread?
The primary mode of transmission is through bite wounds. Casual, non-aggressive contact does not appear to be an efficient route of spreading FIV; as a result, cats in households with stable social structures where housemates do not fight are at little risk for acquiring FIV infections. On rare occasions infection is transmitted from an infected mother cat to her kittens, usually during passage through the birth canal or when the newborn kittens ingest infected milk. Sexual contact is not a major means of spreading FIV.

What does FIV do to a cat?
Infected cats may appear normal for years — often into their teens. However, infection eventually leads to a state of immune deficiency that hinders the cat's ability to protect himself or herself against other infections. The same bacteria, viruses, protozoa, and fungi that may be found in the everyday environment--where they usually do not affect healthy animals--can cause severe illness in those with weakened immune systems. These secondary infections are responsible for many of the diseases associated with FIV.

What are the signs of disease caused by FIV?
Early in the course of infection, the virus is carried to nearby lymph nodes, where it reproduces in white blood cells known as T-lymphocytes. The virus then spreads to other lymph nodes throughout the body, resulting in a generalized but usually temporary enlargement of the lymph nodes, often accompanied by fever. This stage of infection may pass unnoticed unless the lymph nodes are greatly enlarged. An infected cat's health may deteriorate progressively or be characterized by recurrent illness interspersed with periods of relative health. Sometimes not appearing for years after infection, signs of immunodeficiency can appear anywhere throughout the body.

- Poor coat condition and persistent fever with a loss of appetite are commonly seen.
- Inflammation of the gums (gingivitis) and mouth (stomatitis) and chronic or recurrent infections of the skin, urinary bladder, and upper respiratory tract are often present.
- Persistent diarrhea can also be a problem, as can a variety of eye conditions.
- Slow but progressive weight loss is common, followed by severe wasting late in the disease process.
- Various kinds of cancer and blood diseases are much more common in cats infected with FIV, too.
- In unspayed female cats, abortion of kittens or other reproductive failures have been noted.
- Some infected cats experience seizures, behavior changes, and other neurological disorders.
How should FIV-infected cats be managed?

- FIV-infected cats should be confined indoors to prevent spread of FIV infection to other cats in the neighborhood and to reduce their exposure to infectious agents carried by other animals.
- They should be fed nutritionally complete and balanced diets.
- Uncooked food, such as raw meat and eggs, and unpasteurized dairy products should not be fed to FIV-infected cats because the risk of food-borne bacterial and parasitic infections is much higher in immunosuppressed cats.
- Wellness visits for FIV-infected cats should be scheduled with your veterinarian at least every six months. Although a detailed physical examination of all body systems will be performed, your veterinarian will pay special attention to the health of the gums, eyes, skin, and lymph nodes. Your cat's weight will be measured accurately and recorded, because weight loss is often the first sign of deterioration. A complete blood count, serum biochemical analysis, and a urine analysis should be performed annually.
- Vigilance and close monitoring of the health and behavior of FIV-infected cats is even more important than it is for uninfected cats. Alert your veterinarian to any changes in your cat's health as soon as possible.
- There is no evidence from controlled scientific studies to show that immunomodulator, alternative, or antiviral medications have any positive benefits on the health or longevity of healthy FIV-infected cats. However, some antiviral therapies have been shown to benefit some FIV-infected cats with seizures or stomatitis.

Can I become infected with FIV?

Although FIV is a lentivirus similar to HIV (the human immunodeficiency virus) and causes a disease in cats similar to AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) in humans, it is a highly species-specific virus that infects only felines. A number of studies have failed to show any evidence that FIV can infect or cause disease in people.

Modified from the FIV brochure produced from the Cornell Feline Health Center. The entire document can be viewed at http://www.vet.cornell.edu/fhc/resources/brochure/fiv.html