

RSPCA Victoria and Lort Smith Animal Hospital join forces to encourage cat vaccinations

Vaccinating cats will save lives

1 August 2022 — For immediate release

RSPCA Victoria and Lort Smith Animal Hospital have joined forces to encourage the community to vaccinate their cats regularly, in an effort to curb a recent spike of feline panleukopenia, a serious viral disease detected in the Melbourne metropolitan area.

This increase may indicate reduced herd immunity due to a drop off in annual vaccinations which are required to manage the disease.

In the past three months, RSPCA has diagnosed twenty cases of feline panleukopenia compared to just one case in the same period last year while Lort Smith Animal Hospital has diagnosed 50 cases. These numbers are not unsubstantial as just one infectious cat has the potential to infect all other cats in a facility.

As a result of the recent cases of panleukopenia, the daily operations of both RSPCA Victoria and Lort Smith Animal Hospital have been impacted with additional quarantine protocol required to curb the spread of the disease. Subsequently, this has meant an extended length of stay for some cats before they can be adopted which has increased pressure on both organisations.

Due to the infectiousness and severity of the disease, both organisations are concerned for the welfare of Victoria's cats and urge cat owners to keep track of when their pet's vaccinations are due.

An annual vaccination from a veterinarian is recommended for all cats and provides excellent protection from feline panleukopenia. Very difficult to treat, approximately 80% of unvaccinated kittens who contract the disease die.

Symptoms include

- loss of appetite
- extreme tiredness
- vomiting
- fever or fluctuating temperature
- dehydration
- diarrhoea (sometimes bloody)

cats seen with their heads hanging over their water or food bowls but not drinking or eating

RSPCA Victoria's Chief Veterinarian Dr Bronwyn Oke said feline panleukopenia spreads easily between cats, is extremely difficult to control and can be fatal.

"Due to the pandemic, we are all acutely aware of the importance of vaccinations and how they can play an integral role in our health care and the same can be said for vaccinating our cats against diseases such as feline panleukopenia.

“It is important to see a vet immediately if you believe your cat may be suffering from feline panleukopenia. A vet will provide treatment for your cat that might include antibiotics and fluids. However, prevention is the best approach which highlights the importance of regularly vaccinating your cat,” said Dr Oke.

Lort Smith Animal Hospital Head Veterinarian Inpatients Dr Andrew Kapsis said regular vaccination is key to keeping cats healthy.

“We’re seeing a big rise in kittens with panleukopenia coming through Lort Smith’s Hospital and Adoption Centre, and we all need to play our part containing this deadly and highly contagious disease. We encourage everyone who cares for a cat to get them vaccinated – it’s fast and effective and will help us control outbreaks in our feline communities.”

“No matter how large or small, every rescue group and shelter across Australia needs to have effective infection control practices in place. This will help minimise and ultimately stop panleukopenia spilling over to the owned cat population,” said Dr Kapsis.

If cats become unwell, it is important to isolate them from other cats to minimise disease spread and in a shelter environment. This means quarantining cats for observation to test and treat any cats that exhibit symptoms and to stop the spread to other cats. RSPCA Victoria and Lort Smith have seen an increased length of stay for some cats in their Adoption Centres for this reason.

Feline panleukopenia can spread easily through faeces, urine, saliva or vomit of an infected cat. Contaminated surfaces can also spread the disease. Additionally, the disease can spread to other cats through the clothing and shoes of handlers or owners of infected animals.

Reducing the spread

- Disinfect and scrub food bowls, litter trays, bedding and cages.
- Contaminated surfaces can be cleaned with veterinary grade disinfectants (e.g., F10) or diluted household bleach (1 part bleach to 30 parts water) and left on hard surfaces for 10-15 minutes.
- Disinfected surfaces should be rinsed or wiped clean so that the residue does not cause any issues for pets.
- Any potentially contaminated soft materials should be thrown out.
- Feed and handle unwell pets last in multi-pet households and to be mindful of cross contamination. Keep affected cats away from other animals.
- Speak with a veterinarian in relation to any concerns about a pet’s health.

Feline panleukopenia can survive for at least 12 months after first appearing in the environment, including on the surface of food bowls, bedding and litter trays. It is important to maintain good hygiene to prevent further disease spread. Infected cats can remain contagious and shed the virus for up to six weeks. The best protection for cats against this disease is regular vaccination.

RSPCA Victoria is a not-for-profit charity established in 1871. Our vision is to end cruelty to all animals. Across the state we provide community services including animal shelters, clinics, education programs, op shops and an Inspectorate that is authorised to investigate and prosecute cases of animal cruelty. We operate five animal welfare shelters that provide refuge and strive to give more than 17,000 animals each year a second chance. We rely on the generous support of the community for more than 90% of our operating expenses.

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For more information or an interview with an RSPCA Victoria spokesperson, please contact:

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