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Citation for published version:

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1002/vetr.3143

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
The Veterinary record

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Concerning feline infectious peritonitis outbreak in Cyprus

WE are alerting colleagues to an outbreak of feline infectious peritonitis (FIP) in Cyprus that started in the capital city Nicosia in January 2023. An increasing number of cases has gradually been observed in the districts of Larnaca, Limassol and Famagousta. Within 12 weeks the number of PCR-confirmed FIP cases increased more than 20-fold compared to the previous year. Cavitary fluids, abdominal lymph node fine-needle aspiration biopsies or tissue biopsies from cats with clinical signs compatible with FIP were submitted to Vet Dia Gnosis in Limassol. Following cytological or histopathological examination the samples underwent automated total nucleic acid extraction and RT-PCR for the detection of feline coronaviruses (FCoV) at Laboklin Bad Kissingen, Germany.1 There were three and four PCR-confirmed FIP cases in 2021 and 2022 respectively, while from January to April 2023 98 PCR-confirmed FIP cases were reported.

Outbreaks of FIP have been documented in the UK, the USA and Taiwan but were restricted to catteries and rehoming centres.2,3 This outbreak became widespread in different districts of the island very quickly, with local veterinarians reporting clinical cases even in indoor-only cats. This is extremely alarming and suggests that a highly virulent strain of FCoV is present in Cyprus that may potentially be transmitted by mechanical vectors. As such we suggest cats should be kept indoors. Paphos district is geographically the most remote from Nicosia and has not yet experienced increased numbers of cases. To avoid spread of this FCoV strain outside the island, we urge veterinarians to serologically test any cat before it travels outside of Cyprus. Any seropositive cat should not travel outside Cyprus until we have a better understanding of the current outbreak. Ideally, if a cat is allowed to travel it should be kept indoors for 10 to 14 days and retested, as acutely infected cats will likely seroconvert at a later stage. The implementation of travel requirements for cats travelling from Cyprus must be a priority for the UK. This is due to the high numbers of animals travelling between the two countries reflecting the historic links that exist; parts of Cyprus are British overseas territories and a notable number of British immigrants are based permanently or seasonally in Cyprus. Previously, we have seen introduction of other infectious agents to the UK via dogs travelling from Cyprus, such as Hepatozoon canis and Leishmania infantum.4 We are in the process of analysing the FCoV before and during the outbreak and establishing an epidemiological monitoring system. This will provide significant information regarding this highly virulent strain and help us understand what has caused this outbreak and how we can control the impact on the feline population and the risk of spread to other countries. The high number of stray and free-roaming owned cats in Cyprus is something that potentially played a key role in this outbreak, but other factors need to be considered including the recent introduction of FIP treatment and the recent Covid-19 pandemic.

Charalampos Attipa, senior lecturer in veterinary clinical pathology
Danielle Gunn-Moore, professor of feline medicine
Stella Mazeri, EBVS European Specialist in veterinary public health
Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies and The Roslin Institute, University of Edinburgh, Easter Bush Campus, Midlothian EH25 9RG
email: charalampos.attipa@ed.ac.uk

Demetris Epaminondas, vice president of the Pancyprian Veterinary Association
Veterinary Services, Ministry of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Environment, Cyprus

Maria Lyraki, EBVS European Specialist in small animal internal medicine
Vets4Life Referral Hospital, Athens, Greece

Alexandros Hardas, lecturer in veterinary anatomic pathology
Department of Pathobiology and Population Sciences, Royal Veterinary College, Hatfield, Hertfordshire AL9 7TA

Stavroula Loukaidou, veterinary surgeon
Vet Dia Gnosis Ltd, Limassol, Cyprus

Michaela Gentili, veterinary surgeon
Laboklin GmbH and Co KG, Bad Kissingen, Germany