Any cat owner who has had a cat which has died from feline infectious peritonitis will know that this is a horrible disease which has so far come with virtually no hope of the cat surviving.

Feline infectious peritonitis is caused by a mutation (change) in what is called feline enteric coronavirus, a virus which is in fact very common in cats. Only in a small percentage of cats will the virus change to this fatal form. Some cats are more susceptible than others genetically and poor husbandry (especially overcrowding) is a strong factor. It is more common in large multi-cat households, breeding households and in homing centres where there may be many cats together.

At present there is no effective treatment for cats with confirmed feline infectious peritonitis. Initial signs are those of many other cat diseases – loss of appetite, depression, rough coat, weight loss and increased susceptibility to other infections (such as respiratory disease). Cats can develop ‘wet FIP’ where inflammation of the lining of organs produces large volumes of fluid which can result in distension of the abdomen, among other signs.

‘Dry FIP’ causes chronic inflammatory lesions to develop in some organs and can affect the eyes, making them look cloudy. Inflammation of the brain and spinal cord can cause neurological abnormalities such as an unsteady gait. Some cats survive for weeks or months, but not normally more than a year and FIP is ultimately fatal.

Many different treatments have been tried, from supplements which stimulate the immune system, to anti-inflammatory drugs, to non-specific anti-viral drug therapy.

However, scientific papers have recently been published on the use of several of the same types of specific anti-viral drugs that have been used to treat viral infections of humans (such as hepatitis C and HIV/AIDS). These small molecules are readily absorbed into cells and specifically target viral proteins that are essential for virus replication. They don’t seem to be toxic for normal cell functions so seem to be safe and effective.

One paper, published in our veterinary division’s flagship journal the Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery, looks at the use of the drugs in 31 cats with FIP and the results are encouraging. Professor Niels Pedersen, one of the authors who is based at the University of California, Davis, USA, who is also the co-discoverer of the feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and a world leader in the field of research into FIP, says, ‘The results of the field trial were very encouraging – 25 cats survived long-term. Similar reports will be forthcoming as other drugs go through experimental and field testing. We are convinced, based on our research, that anti-viral drugs of the type currently used for HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C virus infection and in test phase for other diseases such as Ebola, will provide the best chance of curing this terrible disease of cats.’

The research phase for these drugs has ended and no more field trials are in process at the moment. Currently there is no drug available for vets to use and a legally approved drug treatment may be two to five years away yet. However, there is now hope. Prospects for cats with FIP have always been bleak, so a future where effective treatment is an option, is a significant and positive step forward.

For further information on FIP, see our website:

https://icatcare.org/advice/cat-health/feline-infectious-peritonitis-fip