

# A feline virus mutation in Cyprus caused far fewer cat deaths than claimed, veterinary leader says

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Cats sit in a shelter at the main linear park, in the capital Nicosia, Cyprus, Wednesday, July 19, 2023. The head of Cyprus' veterinarians' association has dismissed as groundless claims that a lethal mutation of a feline virus has taken the lives of some 300,000 cats, saying they misleadingly depicted the small island nation abroad as a "feline cemetery." Credit: AP Photo/Petros Karadjias

The head of the Cyprus veterinarians association on Wednesday dismissed as greatly exaggerated the claims that a local mutation of a feline virus has killed as many as 300,000 cats on the small Mediterranean island.

The director of the Pancyprian Veterinary Association, Nektaria Ioannou Arsenoglou, said the group's survey of 35 veterinary clinics indicate an island-wide total of only about 8,000 deaths. Arsenoglou said numbers that have been presented by local animal activists and amplified by foreign media outlets "simply don't add up."

Arsenoglou told The Associated Press on Wednesday that the local mutation of a feline coronavirus that causes Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP) is nearly always lethal if left untreated, but that medication can nurse cats back to health in approximately 85% of cases.

Spread through contact with cat feces, neither the virus or its mutation can be passed on to humans.

Specific medication that can treat both the so-called "wet" and "dry" forms of the illness is very expensive, although Arsenoglou said she was "optimistic" that the government would soon be able secure more medicine.

It's unclear how many feral cats live in Cyprus, where they are generally beloved and have a long history. According to Byzantine legend, Saint Helen introduced cats to Cyprus to control venomous snakes plaguing the island when she was on her way back to Constantinople after completing her quest to find the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified.



A cat crosses a pedestrian road, at the main linear park in the capital Nicosia, Cyprus, Wednesday, July 19, 2023. The head of Cyprus’ veterinarians’ association has dismissed as groundless claims that a lethal mutation of a feline virus has taken the lives of some 300,000 cats, saying they misleadingly depicted the small island nation abroad as a “feline cemetery.” Credit: AP Photo/Petros Karadjias

A Cypriot cat activist who goes by the name Marina Niaou and who maintains a feral cat colony complained to the AP that authorities have been dragging their feet in searching out cheap medication to tackle the spread of the virus.

The mutation came to the attention of veterinarians as well as the island's multitude of cat caregivers in January this year, with cases continuing to



rise steadily until mid-spring when they started to level off, Arsenoglou said.

She said the veterinary association has assembled a task force to monitor the spread of the mutation and inform fellow vets and activists of the latest developments.

The feline coronavirus has been around since 1963. Previous epidemics, including one in Greece more than two decades ago, eventually fizzled out without the use of any medication, Arsenoglou said.



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the small island nation abroad as a “feline cemetery.” Credit: AP Photo/Petros Karadjias



A cat rests on a roof of a car, in the capital Nicosia, Cyprus, Wednesday, July 19, 2023. The head of Cyprus’ veterinarians’ association has dismissed as groundless claims that a lethal mutation of a feline virus has taken the lives of some 300,000 cats, saying they misleadingly depicted the small island nation abroad as a “feline cemetery.” Credit: AP Photo/Petros Karadjias



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Measures have already been enacted to prevent the export of the mutation through mandatory medical check-ups of all felines destined for adoption abroad.

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Correction note: This story has been edited to reflect that the virus is a local mutation of a feline coronavirus that is not related to COVID-19.

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