



Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV)

What is feline leukemia virus (FeLV)?

Feline leukemia virus infects cats world-wide. FeLV can suppress the immune system, decreasing the ability of a cat to fight infections. The virus can also cause several types of cancer, such as leukemia and lymphoma. In the United States, about 2%-3% of all cats are infected with FeLV. The viral infection is diagnosed by a blood test performed at a veterinary clinic.

How do cats get this virus?

Cats get FeLV from other cats that are infected. An infected cat can shed the virus in their saliva, nasal fluids, urine, feces and milk. The virus can be transmitted between cats through bite wounds, mutual grooming, sharing food dishes, and from mother to kitten.

What happens once a cat is infected?

Every cat infected with FeLV will go down one of two paths:

1. The cat's immune system is able to fight off infection within the first 2-6 weeks. The cat will show no signs of illness and the virus will go into an inactive state. These cats are unlikely to transmit the disease to another cat.
2. The cat's FeLV test remains positive for more than 16 weeks. These cats will likely not be able to fight off infection and will likely develop FeLV associated diseases within a few years. Cats in this stage have a higher likelihood of being able to transmit the disease to another cat.

The only way to determine the outcome of each cat is through a repeat blood test at a later date. Those adopting a FeLV positive cat will want to consult with their veterinarian and schedule a retest.

How should I care for a FeLV positive cat?

Currently, there is no cure for FeLV, but good veterinary care with regular wellness exams can help prevent and treat or manage some FeLV associated secondary illnesses. During these visits your veterinarian will usually recommend routine blood and urine screenings to check your cat's health. Cats infected with FeLV should also be **kept strictly indoors** to reduce their exposure to infectious diseases and to keep them from spreading FeLV to other cats. A cat with FeLV should also be fed a well-balanced diet. Uncooked or raw diets should be avoided because FeLV infected cats have a lowered ability to fight food borne illnesses.



How long will a FeLV cat live after he or she is diagnosed?

There is no way to predict how long a cat infected with FeLV will live after he or she is diagnosed. If provided proper care and management many infected cats can live many months to years in good health. However, 85% of cats infected with FeLV do not live longer than 3 years after their initial diagnosis. A cat that is currently showing signs of a FeLV-associated health issue (listed below) can be expected to have a shorter life than a cat that appears healthy at the time of diagnosis.

What other diseases can be caused by FeLV?

Many cats infected with FeLV will initially not show any signs of the disease. However, over time you may notice your cat's overall health begin to deteriorate. Your cat's health may deteriorate rather quickly or it may happen with bouts of recurrent illness. Signs to look out for that your cat may be starting to experience FeLV-associated health issues include:

- Loss of appetite
- Weight loss
- Poor coat condition
- Upper Respiratory Infection
- Persistent fever
- Skin infection
- Bladder infection
- Inflammation of gums/mouth
- Persistent Diarrhea
- Significant behavior changes

If any of these changes are noted in the cat, a trip to the veterinarian is highly recommended.

Can a cat with FeLV live with other cats that are not infected?

Ideally, any cat infected with FeLV should be kept separate from non-infected cats to keep all cats as healthy as possible.

Can I get FeLV from a cat?

No. FeLV is species specific and cannot infect a human. However, because of their suppressed immune system, cats infected with FeLV can be at a higher risk of carrying other diseases that may be transmissible to susceptible people. It is recommended that individuals who are pregnant, have suppressed immune systems, the elderly and the very young should talk with their physician prior to adopting a cat with FeLV.

If I have a FeLV cat that passes away, how long should I wait before bringing a new cat home?

The FeLV virus is very unstable outside of a cat's body and will not survive longer than a few hours in most environments. Therefore, a healthy cat can safely be brought into a new home within days of the departure of a FeLV infected cat. However FeLV infected cats have a higher likelihood of carrying other diseases. Therefore it is recommended to fully clean/disinfect food and water dishes, litter boxes, toys, etc. prior to the arrival of a new cat. You should also vacuum carpets and mop floors. Any new cat entering the home should also be fully vaccinated prior to coming home.

Ongoing care and monitoring by your veterinarian will be necessary to keep the cat in the best health possible. If you have additional questions about the FeLV virus, please contact your veterinarian.

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