



Tree House Humane Society

FACT SHEET: FELINE LEUKEMIA VIRUS (FeLV)

What is Feline Leukemia Virus?

Feline leukemia virus, also known as “FeLV,” is the cause of a variety of diseases. As a retrovirus, it replicates itself inside living cells, making it impossible to cure. Specifically, FeLV invades and replicates in cells of the cat’s immune system and tissues that create blood cells. FeLV is specific to cats and does not pose a risk to other animals or people.

What diseases does the virus cause?

In many cats, FeLV infection results in suppression of the immune system. This means that the cat is less able to defend him/her-self against a wide range of infections that would not normally cause a problem in healthy cats. A variety of symptoms could develop, and there is deterioration in their health over time. However, a FeLV cat can live for many years without illness.

How common is FeLV?

FeLV infection is found worldwide in approximately 1-2% of the cat population. The proportion of cats infected differs according to the geographical location, environment and the lifestyle of the cat. Infection is more common in colonies of cats that are un-spayed/un-neutered and where there is close contact between individuals for long periods of time.

How is FeLV transmitted or spread?

A cat with FeLV sheds virus in bodily fluids such as saliva, urine and feces. FeLV is not a highly contagious virus, as the virus cannot survive longer than a few hours in the environment outside of the cat. This means that if you pet a cat with FeLV and then pet another cat, the risk of transmission is essentially zero.

Transmission requires a prolonged period of close contact between infected and susceptible cats, including bites. Susceptible cats are kittens and adult cats with weakened immune systems. Healthy adult cats are essentially immune to the disease. Close contact activities include mating, mutual grooming, and sharing of litter trays and food bowls. Because of the slight possibility of spread, Tree House does NOT recommend co-mingling FeLV positive cats with FeLV negative cats.

How can infection of FeLV be prevented?

- ❖ Have your cats spayed and neutered.
- ❖ Keep cats indoors.
- ❖ Don’t allow your cats to interact with cats that are unknown to you, and could carry disease.
- ❖ If your kitten goes outside, consider vaccination. Speak with your veterinarian. (Although vaccination is helpful in preventing infection with FeLV, no vaccine is 100% protective.)

How long will my FeLV cat live?

Although many FeLV cats live shorter lives, they will have several great years in their new home.

Cats live on average 3 years after diagnosis, but each cat is different. Tree House has even had adult cats with FeLV who lived several years. Eventually, when your cat becomes ill and there is no effective treatment, you will discuss with your veterinarian when it is time to say goodbye.

How do I keep my FeLV cat healthy?

- ❖ Have your cats spayed and neutered.
- ❖ Keep cats indoors.
- ❖ Don’t allow your cats to interact with cats that are unknown to you, and could carry disease.



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- ❖ Get regular examinations every 6 months by a veterinarian.
- ❖ Keep your cat up-to-date on routine vaccinations and preventives (such as parasite medications).
- ❖ Bring your cat to the veterinarian as soon as you notice he/she is not feeling well.
- ❖ Feed a high quality diet.

How do I know if my cat is showing signs of FeLV?

There are many potential issues that FeLV cats can develop, so owners should be aware of their cat's normal behaviors and bring them to the vet right away if anything changes. If your cat becomes ill, it does not mean that your cat cannot be treated – most secondary infections due to the virus are treatable. Some common symptoms of illness include:

- ❖ Lethargy, or a decrease in normal activity
- ❖ Decreased appetite or anorexia
- ❖ Frequent sneezing or coughing
- ❖ Green discharge from the eyes or nose
- ❖ Diarrhea or vomiting

How can FeLV infection be diagnosed?

A quick test can be performed which is able to detect the virus in the blood of an infected cat, also known as a “SNAP” test. This test is accurate and reliable when used on sick cats; false results can occur when testing healthy cats.

If a cat is diagnosed positive on the SNAP test, a second test is sent to the lab called an “IFA”. This tests for cells infected by the virus in the bloodstream, not just the virus itself. If a cat is positive on both tests, there is no need to retest – the cat has FeLV and it is infecting their cells.

If a cat is positive on the one test but not the other, your veterinarian (and Tree House) will recommend retesting in approximately 60 days. This is to ensure diagnosis. In rare cases a cat will test positive the first test, then negative the second test. This means they have been exposed to FeLV but may have “cleared” the infection.

Is there any treatment for FeLV infection or disease?

There is currently no specific treatment for FeLV-infected cats and no cure. If FeLV is causing immunosuppression and the patient develops secondary infections, the secondary infections may be treatable, leading to improvement.

Written by Dr. Emily Swiniarski. Edited 3/2019.