



TREE HOUSE Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) Fact Sheet

What is Feline Leukemia Virus?

Feline leukemia virus, also known as “FeLV,” is a contagious retrovirus that only infects cats. With progression of infection, it is known to cause a variety of diseases. Specifically, FeLV invades and replicates in cells of the cat’s immune system and tissues that create blood cells.

How does FeLV harm a cat?

FeLV weakens a cat’s immune system and predisposes cats to a variety of infections and diseases. Symptoms vary and include fever, enlarged lymph nodes, loss of appetite, weight loss, unthrifty coat, infections, and gingivitis. The virus eventually contributes to several disease processes, including anemia, liver and intestinal disease, oral/dental disease, chronic infections, and lymphosarcoma, a highly malignant and fatal cancer of the lymph system.

How is FeLV transmitted or spread?

FeLV is shed in bodily fluids such as saliva, urine and feces. Transmission requires close contact and is primarily spread among close-living cats, through bites, or from mother to kitten. Outside of the body, FeLV is a very weak virus and cannot survive long in the environment. This means you cannot spread it by petting a FeLV cat. Healthy adult cats are at a lower risk of becoming infected and may carry some immunity to the disease. Kittens and adult cats with weakened immune systems are most susceptible to infection. Because of the potential for spread, Tree House does not recommend co-mingling FeLV positive cats with FeLV negative cats. Having cats spayed or neutered and keeping pets indoors can help prevent your cats from contracting the virus.

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

Owners should be aware of their cat’s normal behaviors and bring them to the vet right away if concerns arise. If your cat becomes ill, it does not mean that your cat cannot be treated – most secondary issues due to the virus are treatable or manageable. Some common symptoms of illness include:

- Lethargy, or a decrease in normal activity
- Decreased appetite or anorexia
- Respiratory concerns, including discharge from the eyes or nose
- Diarrhea or vomiting

How can FeLV infection be diagnosed?

Diagnosing FeLV can be complicated as there are several different stages or outcomes of FeLV infection. Furthermore, there is simply not a perfect test. A quick blood test known as a “SNAP” test is typically the first diagnostic step. Following a positive SNAP test, additional tests may be recommended to differentiate a progressive infection from regressive or abortive infection. Cats with a regressive or abortive infection are less likely to shed the virus, making them less contagious, and unlikely to develop FeLV-associated illnesses. Cats with progressive infections are infected for life, are more susceptible to illness, and thus have a shortened life expectancy.

Testing in kittens less than 6 months old is slightly different. A positive SNAP test should be confirmed with further testing or repeated every 60 days until 6 months of age. If a kitten becomes negative with repeated testing, it is likely they shed the virus and are truly negative.

How long will my FeLV cat live?

While many FeLV cats live shorter lives, they can have several great years following a diagnosis. Cats live on average 2-3 years after diagnosis, but each cat is different. Furthermore, current studies suggest that the life expectancy for FeLV progressive infections is much longer than previously expected. 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.
- Get regular examinations every 6 months by a veterinarian.
- Keep your cat up-to-date on routine vaccinations and preventives.
- Bring your cat to the veterinarian as soon as you notice he/she is not feeling well.
- Feed a high quality diet.

Is there any treatment for FeLV infection or disease?

There is currently no specific treatment or cure for FeLV-infected cats. You can speak with your veterinarian about vaccines that may prevent FeLV in at-risk cats. FeLV can cause several associated illnesses, such as infections or other inflammatory conditions. These may be treatable or manageable, leading to improved health and longevity.