

FAQs about feline leukemia virus (FeLV)



What is FeLV?

FeLV stands for feline leukemia virus. As the name implies, it is a viral infection that affects a cat's immune system and bone marrow.

How do cats get FeLV?

The virus is typically spread from infected cats to noninfected cats through close personal contact, usually involving saliva. It can be spread by grooming, shared food bowls, bites and other forms of close contact. It can also be transmitted from a mother cat to a kitten in utero and from the milk of an infected cat.

The virus does not live long outside of a cat host, so spreading FeLV via human clothing and hands is very unlikely. If an FeLV-positive cat is housed in a separate room from an FeLV-negative cat, transmission is unlikely. To be on the safe side, cats should not share food and water bowls.

What are the signs of FeLV infection?

There are no specific signs of FeLV infection but, in general, cats with FeLV have weaker immune systems, which makes them more prone to upper respiratory infections, dental disease and mycoplasma haemofelis that can cause anemia. Most cats with FeLV live normal lives, but their life spans tend to be significantly shorter. Still, adult cats can live many healthy years with the illness. Sadly, kittens contracting the disease often don't fare as well. Around 80% of kittens with FeLV do not live past three years, and most die within a year. The young cats tend to die from feline infectious peritonitis (FIP), lymphoma (a cancer affecting lymphatic tissue) or bone marrow disease. It is less likely for older cats to get a persistent FeLV infection, and when they do, they tend to handle the disease better.

How do I know if my cat has FeLV?

The only way to know if your cat is FeLV-positive is to have your veterinarian run an ELISA test. Cats can test positive within a few weeks after exposure, but almost all cats positive for the virus will test positive within 28 days; however, testing positive just means that the virus is circulating in the cat's blood. It does not mean that the cat will be permanently infected. It is possible for a cat to fight off the FeLV infection.

No diagnostic test is perfect, though, and the ELISA test can give false negative or positive results. Additionally, any test performed represents only a single point in time. Various options for confirmatory testing are available and you should discuss those options with your veterinarian. In some cases, results can be difficult to interpret definitively, due to the complexity of this disease. Extended testing may also provide additional information about prognosis (how likely a particular cat is to get sick from FeLV-related illness).

Can FeLV be treated?

There is no cure for FeLV, so most treatment of FeLV-positive cats involves supportive care. Because FeLV-positive cats have weaker immune systems, they do need to be treated for upper respiratory infections more often than FeLV-negative cats; however, they tend to need dental treatments at a younger age than other cats.

What can be done to prevent the spread of FeLV?

Since there is no cure, prevention is the best treatment for FeLV. If an FeLV-negative cat is not around an FeLV-positive cat, the FeLV-negative cat will not get the virus. Although it varies depending on where a cat lives, roughly 2% to 3% of cats are FeLV-positive. So, keeping your cats indoors should prevent exposure. Also, all cats coming into the household should be tested before introducing them to your cats.

There is a vaccine for FeLV. If your cat does go outside, or if you bring cats into your house that you cannot test or isolate, your cat should be vaccinated, especially at a young age.

Can FeLV-negative and FeLV-positive cats live together?

People who have cats may decide to share their homes with both FeLV-positive and FeLV-negative cats. Negative cats sharing a house with positive cats should be vaccinated for FeLV. It's important to note, though, that while vaccination provides some protection, the range of effectiveness at preventing infection is from 90% to 98% (depending on the study cited), and FeLV is difficult to study under natural conditions. A safe option is to keep negative cats vaccinated and prevent prolonged contact with positive cats (by keeping them in separate rooms or portions of the house).

Can FeLV-positive cats live a happy and rewarding life?

FeLV-positive cats can live perfectly happy lives. People who have FeLV-positive cats should be aware that those cats may have a shorter life span and that they should be taken to a veterinarian as soon as a problem is noticed. Many people who adopt and care for FeLV-positive cats describe it as a wonderful, gratifying experience and that they would gladly do so again.