

What you need to know about

FELINE LEUKEMIA VIRUS



Understanding the risk to your cat





WHAT IS FELINE LEUKEMIA VIRUS?

Feline leukemia virus, or FeLV, is one of the most common infectious diseases in cats. The percentage of cats infected varies depending on age, health, environment, and lifestyle. Young cats and kittens, cats that go outdoors, and cats that live in households with other cats that might carry the virus are at greatest risk of infection.

While about 2% to 3% of all cats in the US are infected, the prevalence rises up to 30% or more in high-risk and sick cats. FeLV weakens a cat's immune system so it is less able to defend itself from other infections. It may cause cancer in cats or various blood disorders.



UP TO ONE-THIRD
of at-risk cats **get FeLV**



HOW DO CATS BECOME INFECTED WITH FeLV?

Cat-to-cat contact through mutual grooming or bite wounds is the primary way cats become infected. FeLV in saliva, nasal secretions, urine, feces, and blood is transmitted to healthy cats during intimate contact with infected cats. Shared food or water dishes can be sources of infection. Kittens can get the virus from infected mothers while still in the womb or through nursing.

Once the virus has infected a cat, it multiplies and enters the blood. Depending on how effective a cat's immune system is in fighting the virus, the infection can take a number of courses. In some cats, the virus is successfully fought off. In others, it hides in body tissues but doesn't cause immediate signs of disease. In yet other cats, it spreads throughout the body and causes serious illness.

FeLV infects only cats, not people or other animals.





WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF FeLV INFECTION?

Some cats will have no signs of illness initially, but their health will gradually become worse over weeks, months, or even years. Many cats show a large variety of signs that are not very specific, including poor coat condition, skin and respiratory infections, eye problems, weakness, and a whole host of others.

Common signs include:

- fever
- loss of appetite
- weight loss
- diarrhea
- swollen lymph nodes
- pale or inflamed gums



HOW IS FeLV INFECTION DIAGNOSED?

Veterinarians can determine if a cat is infected with FeLV by performing a simple blood test. Because many cats can show no signs of disease even though they are infected, it is important to test all previously untested cats.



WHO SHOULD BE TESTED?

- All cats at least once
- All kittens
- Any new cat brought into a household with other cats
- Sick cats
- Cats with signs of FeLV-associated disorders, such as cancer, anemia, and immune disease
- Cats exposed to FeLV
- Cats with high-risk lifestyles
- Unvaccinated cats prior to being vaccinated

IS MY CAT AT RISK FOR INFECTION?

- Is a kitten
- Goes outside
- Fights with other cats
- Lives in a household where it's frequently exposed to new cats
- Has close contact with other cats

If you checked off any of these, talk to your veterinarian about preventive measures like vaccination that can help protect your cat from FeLV infection.

WHAT CAN BE DONE IF MY CAT BECOMES INFECTED?

Good care can help keep your cat feeling well for a long time. A nutritious diet is very important. Also, cats should be kept indoors and be spayed or neutered to protect them from exposure to other diseases and reduce stress. Twice-yearly veterinary visits will help ensure FeLV-infected cats get the care they need.

Cats with persistent FeLV infection may live several years, but their overall life expectancy is decreased compared with uninfected cats. About 80% of cats with active FeLV infection die within 3 years of diagnosis.



HOW CAN I PROTECT MY CAT FROM FeLV INFECTION?

Avoid contact with cats that might be infected with FeLV. For cats at high risk of exposure, effective FeLV vaccines are available. Your veterinarian can help determine whether your cat should be vaccinated against FeLV.

IS VACCINATION AGAINST FeLV SAFE?

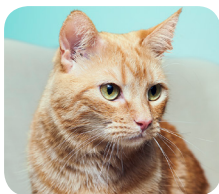
Cats have been vaccinated against FeLV for many years, and while minor side effects do occur, the vaccines are generally safe and well tolerated. Sometimes cats will experience tenderness or swelling at the injection site, listlessness, or fever, but these usually go away very quickly. Most vaccines given to cats, including the FeLV vaccine, have the potential to cause tumors at the injection site, but this is very rare.

The benefits of protecting a cat against the serious, deadly disease associated with FeLV infection usually outweigh the risks of vaccination. And recently, a vaccine has been approved that only requires a booster every 2 years instead of annually. This means maintaining your cat's protection against FeLV is easier than ever.

There is no cure for FeLV infection. **PREVENTING EXPOSURE** is the best way to manage it.

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT FeLV?

Ask your veterinarian if you have further questions about FeLV infection or vaccination.



*Please visit the
Cornell Feline Health Center
for more information.*