

Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV)

What is Feline Leukemia Virus?

Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) is a serious viral disease that affects **only cats**. Fortunately, there are many ways we can protect our cats from exposure to this disease.

How common is FeLV?

FeLV-infected cats are found worldwide, but the prevalence of infection varies greatly depending on a cat's age, health, environment, and lifestyle. In the United States, approximately 2-3% of all cats are infected with FeLV and within the Western United States it is estimated that 2.3% of cats are infected with FeLV. Regardless of region, infection rates rise significantly—13% or more—in cats that are ill, very young, or otherwise at high risk of infection.

How would my cat get FeLV?

The most common way cats get the disease is through saliva and casual contact with an infected cat (ex: mutual grooming, sharing bowls, touching noses). Since this disease is rather contagious between cats, it is important to completely isolate new cats of unknown viral status and to wash your hands between handling cats. Kittens are more susceptible to FeLV. Cats at greater risk of exposure are those who are allowed outdoors and more likely to encounter infected cats. The virus can also be transmitted from mother to kittens.

How would I test my cat for FeLV?

A simple blood test, often called a “snap” test, can be performed to test for FeLV. The blood test is quite accurate, but false positives and occasionally false negatives do occur. A positive test should be confirmed by another blood test called the IFA test, which can be done at a full-service vet clinic. If the IFA test is negative, it could mean that the cat is 1) not infected with FeLV at all, or that 2) the cat was recently infected (up to 30 days ago) but won't test positive yet, in which case a repeat IFA test should be done again approximately four weeks later to confirm.

How does FeLV make my cat sick?

The Feline Leukemia Virus can cause bone marrow suppression. One of the functions of bone marrow is to produce immune system cells that fight off infection. The immune system normally protects your cat from common infectious agents like bacteria and viruses that do not generally cause disease in healthy cats. However, if a cat's immune system is weakened, as with FeLV, these infections can cause disease. FeLV is also associated with the development of certain types of cancer.

What should I expect with my FeLV infected cat?

Cats infected with FeLV have 4 possible outcomes:

- Most often they succumb to the infection and develop FeLV associated diseases. The development of FeLV associated diseases includes bone marrow suppression or cancer.
- Some overcome the virus, and may or may not develop illnesses at some point in their lifetime they do remain infectious.
- Though rare, some completely eliminate the virus from their system.
- Also considered rare, the virus could be confined / localized to a small region of their body, such as a mammary gland.

How can I protect my cat from FeLV?

- Keep cats exclusively **indoors**.
- **Vaccinations** are highly recommended for kittens and also for adult cats determined to be at risk (ex: cats that go outdoors or encounter new cats that have not been tested). Vaccinations will **not** interfere with testing for the disease.
- **Isolate & test new kittens and cats** for FeLV before allowing them to interact with your existing pets.

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