

What is Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV)?



There is a lot of misinformation out there about FeLV. We're here to share the facts!

Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) is a virus that causes anemia and weakens a cat's immune system, making them susceptible to secondary infections. There is no cure for FeLV, but providing regular medical care and a low-stress environment can oftentimes earn the cat several more happy years.

NOTE: Many people confuse FeLV with FIV (Feline Immunodeficiency Virus), but they are very different. In most cases, FIV tends to have less of an impact on lifespan than FeLV. See our handout titled "What is FIV?" for more information.

How does a cat get FeLV?

Kittens born to FeLV-positive mothers are at high-risk of contracting the virus. Cats can also get FeLV from regular, prolonged contact with infected saliva or urine, such as when mutually grooming or sustaining a bite from a FeLV-positive cat (or, in rare cases, when sharing litter boxes or food dishes.)

What are the symptoms of FeLV?

Cats can go years without showing any symptoms of FeLV. As the virus progresses, a cat's symptoms may come and go or just grow continually worse. Common symptoms include:

- Enlarged lymph nodes
- Persistent fever
- Weight loss
- Poor coat condition
- Poor appetite
- Persistent diarrhea
- Eye conditions
- Behavior change
- Stomatitis/dental issues

Veterinarians use a blood test to test for FeLV.

How do I prevent my cat from getting FeLV?

Get your cat vaccinated. The FeLV vaccine is not 100% effective, but it does reduce the likelihood of contracting the virus. It is too late to vaccinate a cat who is already FeLV-positive.

Keep your cat indoors. This is the only way to make sure they don't encounter a neighborhood cat who has FeLV. You should also test any new cat coming into your household before they interact with your resident cat.

I'm considering adopting a cat with FeLV. What do I do?

The first step is to make an appointment with a veterinarian. (If you do not already have a vet you like, check out our list of low-cost clinics!) While there is no way to cure the virus, the veterinarian will help you decide the best management plan for your new cat. Some cats with FeLV will have several months ahead of them, while others will have several years. What you can do to help your cat stay healthy is prevent them from encountering any diseases their immune system can't handle.

The vet may suggest the following:

- A well-balanced diet. Avoid raw food diets – they often contain parasites and pathogens that your cat's immune system may not be able to handle
- Supplements to boost your cat's immune system
- Visiting the vet at least twice per year
- Keeping your cat indoors (not only does this keep your vulnerable cat safe, but it protects the FeLV-negative cats in your community)
- Keeping a close eye on your cat's health and behavior. You should bring them to the vet if you notice anything, however small – treating any secondary infections early is key to keeping your cat healthy!

Is it safe for my family to live with a FeLV-positive cat?

For your human family - **yes**. FeLV cannot spread to humans.

For your animal family – **also yes**. Only cats can get FeLV, so dogs, bunnies, and other species are safe. As for your other cats, talk to your veterinarian. They may advise you to vaccinate your uninfected cats and/or separate your uninfected cats from your infected cat.

Still have questions about FeLV? We're here to help. Check out our list of "Low-Cost Clinics" to find a veterinarian or call/email us directly.