



Facts About Feline Leukemia Virus

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Feline leukemia virus (FeLV) is second only to trauma as the leading cause of death in **cats**, killing 85% of persistently infected felines within three years of diagnosis. The virus commonly causes **anemia** or lymphoma, but because it suppresses the immune system, it can also predispose cats to deadly infections.

Yet, exposure to the feline leukemia virus doesn't have to be a death sentence; about 70% of cats who encounter the virus are able to resist infection or eliminate the virus on their own.

How Feline Leukemia Virus Is Transmitted

Feline leukemia is a disease that only affects cats – it cannot be transmitted to people, dogs, or other animals. FeLV is passed from one cat to another through saliva, blood, and to some extent, urine and feces. The virus does not live long outside the cat's body – probably just a few hours. **Grooming** and fighting seem to be the commonest ways for infection to spread. Kittens can contract the disease in utero or through an infected mother's milk. The disease is often spread by apparently healthy cats, so even if a cat appears healthy, it may be infected and able to transmit the virus.

Your Cat's Risk Factors

Exposure to infected cats raises your cat's risk of contracting FeLV, especially for kittens and young adult cats. Older cats are less likely to contract the infection, because resistance seems to increase with age. For indoor-only cats, the risk of contracting FeLV is very low. Cats in multi-cat households or in catteries are more at risk, especially if they share water and food dishes and **litter boxes**.

Only about 3% of cats in single-cat households have the virus, but for cats that spend time outdoors, the rate is much higher. Still, the prevalence of FeLV has decreased over the last 25 years because of vaccines and reliable tests.

Symptoms of Feline Leukemia Virus

Cats infected with FeLV may exhibit one or more of the following symptoms:

- Pale gums
- Yellow color in the mouth and whites of eyes
- Enlarged lymph nodes
- Bladder, skin, or upper respiratory infections
- **Weight loss** and/or loss of appetite
- Poor coat condition
- Progressive **weakness** and lethargy
- **Fever**
- **Diarrhea**
- Breathing difficulty
- Reproductive problems like sterility in unspayed female cats
- Stomatitis – Oral disease that includes ulceration of gingiva

Diagnosing Feline Leukemia Virus

Your veterinarian can diagnose the disease by conducting a simple blood test called an ELISA, which identifies FeLV proteins in the blood. This test is highly sensitive and can identify cats with very early infections. It is important to remember that some cats will manage to clear the infection within a few months and will subsequently test negative.

A second blood test, the IFA, detects the progressive phase of the infection, and cats with positive results for this test are unlikely to clear the virus. The IFA test is performed at a laboratory, rather than in your vet's clinic. In general, cats that are IFA-positive have a poor long-term prognosis.

Treatment for Feline Leukemia Virus

Eighty-five percent of cats persistently infected with feline leukemia virus die within three years of diagnosis. However, regular veterinary check-ups and good preventive health care can help keep these cats feeling well for some time and help protect them from secondary infection. Twice-yearly physical examinations, laboratory testing, and parasite control can prevent complications and identify problems quickly. All FeLV infected cats should be kept indoors and be neutered.

There is presently no cure for FeLV infection. Secondary infections can be treated as they appear, and cats with **cancer** can receive chemotherapy. However, the prognosis is grave for cats with bone marrow compromise or widespread lymphoma.

Protecting Your Cat From Feline Leukemia Virus

Keeping your cat indoors and away from infected cats is a sure way to prevent them from contracting FeLV. In addition, vaccines can be given to cats at high risk of exposure, such as those who go outside or live in shelters or catteries. Only cats that test negative for FeLV should be vaccinated, and even those that have received the vaccine should be tested if there has been a possible exposure to the virus. The test should not be given before 30 days after the possible exposure. According to the American Association of Feline Practitioners, any cat that's sick should be tested. That's because there is a wide variety of health issues that can be associated with the virus.

New cats or kittens over eight weeks of age should be tested for the virus before being introduced to a multi-cat household. Most veterinarians counsel against introducing a new cat into a household with a FeLV-positive cat, because they may be at risk for contracting the infection – even with vaccination. In addition, the stress of a newcomer may adversely affect the FeLV-positive cat.

WebMD Veterinary Reference

Reviewed by **Amy Flowers, DVM** on September 13, 2020

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