

FELINE VACCINATION INFORMATION



Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV)

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.

FeLV 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.

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 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

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 such as sterility in unspayed female cats

FeLV can be diagnosed with a simple blood test called an ELISA that identifies FeLV proteins in the blood. The test is highly sensitive and can identify very early infections. Some cats that test positive 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; 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.

Eighty-five percent of cats persistently infected with FeLV die within three years of diagnosis. However, regular veterinary check-ups and good preventive health care can help keep infected 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 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.

Keeping your cat indoors and away from infected cats is a sure way to prevent him from contracting FeLV. In addition, cats at high risk of exposure, such as those who go outside or live in shelters or catteries should be vaccinated. Only cats that test negative for FeLV should be vaccinated, and even those that have received the vaccine should be tested annually.

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 he or she 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.