

## FELINE LEUKEMIA VIRUS - FeLV

### What is Feline Leukemia Virus?

Feline leukemia virus, also known as “FeLV,” is the cause of a variety of diseases. As a retrovirus, it replicates itself inside living cells, making it impossible to cure. Specifically, FeLV invades and replicates in cells of the cat’s immune system and tissues that create blood cells. FeLV is specific to cats and does not pose a risk to other animals or people.

### What diseases does the virus cause?

In many cats, FeLV infection results in suppression of the immune system. This means that the cat is less able to defend him/herself against a wide range of infections that would not normally cause a problem in healthy cats. A variety of symptoms could develop and there is deterioration in their health over time. However, a FeLV cat can live for many years without illness.

### How common is FeLV?

FeLV infection is found worldwide in approximately 3% of the cat population in the United States. The proportion of cats infected differs according to the geographical location, environment and the lifestyle of the cat. Infection is more common in colonies of cats that are unspayed/unneutered and where there is close contact between individuals for long periods of time.

### How is FeLV transmitted or spread?

A cat with FeLV sheds virus in bodily fluids such as saliva, urine and feces. FeLV is not a highly contagious virus, as the virus cannot survive longer than a few hours in the environment outside of the cat. This means that if you pet a cat with FeLV and then pet another cat, the risk of transmission is essentially zero.

Transmission requires a prolonged period of close contact between infected and susceptible cats, including bites. Susceptible cats are kittens and adult cats with weakened immune systems. Healthy adult cats are essentially immune to the disease. Close contact activities include mating, mutual grooming, and sharing of litter trays and food bowls. Because of the slight possibility of spread, HAWS does not recommend co-mingling FeLV positive cats with FeLV negative cats.

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## How do I keep my FeLV cat healthy?

- Have your cat(s) spayed or neutered.
- Keep your cat(s) indoors.
- Don't allow your cat(s) to interact with cats that are unknown to you, and could carry disease.
- Have regular examinations for your cat(s), every six months, by a veterinarian.
- Keep your cat(s) up-to-date on routine vaccinations and preventives (such as parasite medications).
- Bring your cat(s) to the veterinarian as soon as you notice he/she is not feeling well.
- Feed your cat(s) a high quality diet.

## How do I know if my cat is showing signs of FeLV?

There are many potential issues that cats with FeLV can develop, so owners should be aware of their cat's normal behaviors and bring them to the vet right away if anything changes. If your cat becomes ill, it does not mean that your cat cannot be treated - most secondary infections due to the virus are treatable. Some common symptoms of illness include:

- Lethargy, or a decrease in normal activity.
- Decreased appetite or anorexia.
- Frequent sneezing or coughing.
- Green discharge from the eyes or nose.
- Diarrhea or vomiting.

## How can FeLV infection be diagnosed?

As more studies are done, we are finding that we don't have complete understanding of the diagnosis, transmissibility, and outcome of this virus. The diagnosis is less straightforward than previously believed, and cats may live for many years after testing positive for the virus.

Testing typically begins with an in office rapid test, known as a "snap" test. If positive, we encourage you to work with your veterinarian to determine the timing and type of following testing options available.