

FAQs About FeLV

What is FeLV?

FeLV stands for feline leukemia virus. It's a viral infection of cats that affects their immune system and bone marrow.

How do cats get FeLV?

The virus typically spreads via close contact of infected and non-infected cats. Normally spread via saliva, it can also be spread by grooming, shared food bowls, and bites. It can also be transmitted from a mother to kitten in utero or during nursing. Less common but still possible causes of transmission of the virus include through fleas, blood transfusions or contaminated needles. It is typically not spread in urine or feces.

The virus does not live long outside of a cat host, so spreading FeLV via human clothing and hands is very unlikely. Thus, if a FeLV-positive cat is housed in a separate room from a FeLV-negative cat, it is not likely that transmission will occur (although it would still be wise not to share food bowls).

What are the signs of FeLV infection?

There are no specific signs of FeLV infection. In general, cats with FeLV have weaker immune systems so they are more prone to infections, such as upper respiratory infections, dental disease and certain parasitic infections. Most adult cats with FeLV live normal, but significantly shorter, lives. The majority of FeLV kittens won't reach adulthood. It is less likely for older cats to get a persistent infection, and when they do, they tend to handle the disease better.

How do I know if my cat has FeLV?

The only way to know is a veterinarian-administered ELISA test. Most infected cats take up to 28 days to test positive. Testing positive, however, just means that the virus is circulating in the cat's blood; it does not mean that the cat has a permanent, persistent infection.

To find out if it is a persistent infection, an IFA test must be sent to a lab. If this test is positive, the cat is positive for FeLV and always will be. If it is negative, there is a chance the cat can fight off the infection (although recent research shows that the virus may just be dormant until a physiological stressor allows it to circulate again). If the IFA is negative, both the ELISA and the IFA should be repeated in six weeks. Some cats remain discordant (ELISA positive, but IFA negative) for a very long time; it may be that they have a localized infection. We don't recommend that these cats live with FeLV-negative cats, as they may be able to spread the virus to other cats. Cats who have fought off the virus are less likely to get re-infected, but it is possible.

Can FeLV be treated?

There is no specific treatment for FeLV, so most of the treatment of FeLV-positive cats involves supportive care. Because FeLV-positive cats have weaker immune systems,

they do need to be treated for upper respiratory infections more often than FeLV-negative cats. Also, they tend to need dentals at a younger age than other cats.

What can be done to prevent the spread of FeLV?

Since there is no cure, prevention is the best treatment for FeLV. A healthy cat can only get the virus from an infected cat. It varies depending on where one lives, but roughly two to eight percent of outdoor cats are FeLV-positive. So, keeping your cats indoors should prevent exposure. Also, all cats coming into the household should be tested before introducing them to your cats.

There is a vaccine for FeLV. If your cat does go outside, or if you bring cats into your house that you cannot test or isolate, your cat should be vaccinated, especially at a young age. The vaccine is not perfect, though; there has been an association of tumors developing at the site of FeLV vaccines. With improvement in vaccines, however, this is becoming much less common.

Can FeLV-negative and FeLV-positive cats live together?

A negative and positive cat could certainly live in the same house, as long as they do not have contact with each other.

Can FeLV-positive cats have a good life?

FeLV-positive cats can live perfectly happy lives, and they deserve to do so. People who have FeLV-positive cats just need to be aware that they may have a shorter life span and that they need to be taken to a veterinarian as soon as a problem is noted.

FAQs About FIV

What is FIV?

FIV stand for feline immunodeficiency virus. It is in the same class of virus as HIV. FIV, which can live in many different tissues in cats, typically weakens the cat's immune system.

How do cats get FIV?

One of the tissues in which FIV lives is the salivary glands, so the most common route of infection is a deep bite wound from a FIV-positive cat to another cat. It can also be transmitted via blood, in utero and from milk from an infected mother cat. It is very rare for cats to get FIV from just being around infected cats, from sharing food bowls, or from a person touching a FIV-positive cat and then touching a FIV-negative cat.

What are the signs of FIV infection?

There are no specific signs of FIV infection. FIV-positive cats have a weaker immune system so they are more prone to getting infections such as upper respiratory infections, ringworm and dental disease. Other than that, FIV-positive cats tend to live normal lives and have a normal length of life.

How do I know if my cat has FIV?

There are no obvious signs of FIV so the only way to know is to do a blood test. The most common is a veterinarian-administered ELISA test (often called a SNAP test), which looks for antibodies to FIV. An antibody is a protein made by the cat in response to FIV infection. A cat can test positive as soon as two to four weeks after exposure, but it can take up to eight weeks.

Kittens under six months of age may test positive after having received antibodies from their mothers, either in utero or via milk. It can take up to six months for these antibodies to go away. Thus, it is a good idea to retest a kitten who tests positive after he or she has reached six months of age.

Can FIV be treated?

There are no proven treatments to rid a cat of FIV. Most FIV-positive cats handle the disease well, but it is important to concentrate on treating the secondary illnesses.

What can be done to prevent the spread of FIV?

Cats should be kept indoors so they do not fight with a FIV-positive cat. Depending on where one lives, the rate of FIV-positive cats ranges from four to 24 percent. A FIV-positive cat can live with a FIV-negative cat as long as both are spayed or neutered, and neither cat is a fighter, or the FIV-positive cat has no teeth. (FIV-positive cats commonly have severe dental disease, which often means it is necessary to remove all their teeth.)

There is a vaccine for FIV, but Best Friends does not recommend it because the vaccine does not have the best efficacy and, after a cat is vaccinated for FIV, the cat will test positive for the virus. At this point, no test can differentiate whether a cat tests positive for FIV from the vaccine or from having the infection. If a cat escapes and is picked up by local animal control, and then tested, the cat may be killed because he or she tests positive.

Can FIV-negative and FIV-positive cats live together?

Yes, as long as the cats get along, are fixed, and do not fight. They can safely share food bowls, water bowls and litter boxes as well as snuggle with each other. The risk that a FIV-positive cat could spread the virus to a FIV-negative cat can be minimized by having them live in separate rooms until you are confident that they will not fight with each other.

Can FIV-positive cats have a good and long life?

FIV-positive cats can live normal lives both in quality and duration. They do take special care in terms of monitoring them for signs of infection and they do have a tendency to have bad dental disease.

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