

Living with Your FeLV-Positive Cat

By Mike Dix, DVM

Feline leukemia virus (FeLV) is a disease in cats that can cause anemia and lymphoma, among other serious illnesses. The virus can also suppress the cat's immune system, affecting his/her ability to fight off bacteria, viruses and fungi that contribute to other serious health problems.

The good news is that FeLV-positive cats may live many years in a healthy state. There is no set life expectancy for FeLV-positive cats; much depends on the cat's immune system and ability to fight the virus. If exposed, some adult cats can fight off the virus, but if they test positive after exposure, it is a lot harder for them to clear themselves of the virus. Cats who fight off the virus develop immunity and become resistant to future infections. Unfortunately, kittens who are infected usually do not live beyond two years.



Of the exposed adult cats who don't fight off the virus, a little more than half will become latent carriers of the disease. This means that they will not be seriously affected by the virus, but they are unable to fully combat it and will continue to test positive. A little less than half of the adult cats who test positive for feline leukemia virus will succumb to the disease within two to five years of infection.

Diagnosis

Blood tests will reveal if a cat is negative or positive for the feline leukemia virus. There are two tests for FeLV. An ELISA (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay) test is usually the first diagnostic test and is performed by your veterinarian. It's a very sensitive initial screening test, but is in fact so sensitive that it frequently turns up a false positive result — that is, it can state that a cat has the virus when he or she does not.

For this reason, if a cat does test positive on the ELISA test, a second test, IFA (indirect immunofluorescent antibody assay), is frequently performed to confirm the diagnosis and give you and your veterinarian insight as to the severity of the virus and your cat's ability to fight the disease. In addition, the IFA test, but not the initial ELISA test, will tell whether the cat is capable of transmitting the virus to another cat.

Daily Care

If you have a FeLV-positive cat, you should develop a close relationship with a veterinarian whom you trust and schedule wellness visits twice per year, or as recommended by your vet. You should also closely watch the health and behavior of the cat for weight loss, appetite changes, or any abnormal appearance to the cat's gums, eyes, skin or lymph nodes. Immediately alert your veterinarian if you see any changes in your cat's health.

Feed the cat a nutritionally complete and balanced diet. Avoid uncooked food, such as raw meat and eggs, and unpasteurized dairy products because the risk of food-borne bacterial and parasitic infections is much higher in immune-suppressed cats.

FelV-positive cats should remain indoors, not only to reduce their exposure to other infectious conditions in the environment, but also to prevent the spread of infection to other cats in the neighborhood.

Finally, as with other pets, it's important to spay or neuter FelV-infected cats.

Q&A About FeLV

How is the virus spread?

The feline leukemia virus is spread through direct contact with an infected cat. High concentrations of the virus are found in saliva, while lower concentrations can be found in blood, urine and feces. The virus is most commonly transmitted through shared food and water bowls, grooming of each other or bites. Litter boxes, too, can be a source of transmission. The virus may also be passed from an infected momma cat to her kittens, either before birth or afterwards as she is nursing. The virus may be transmitted during breeding.

Can humans become infected with the feline leukemia virus?

No, feline leukemia is species-specific and only affects felines.

Is there a cure for feline leukemia?

No. Medications can be given to relieve and treat symptoms such as upper respiratory infections, digestive problems and stomatitis, but currently there are no medications that have proven to be successful in eliminating the virus from an infected cat's system.

Is there a vaccine to prevent infection from feline leukemia?

Yes. However, no vaccine is 100-percent effective. Cats should be kept safely indoors. If cats are let outside, they should only be allowed outside in a securely enclosed cattery where they will not be able to come in contact with other cats. In addition, FeLV-negative cats (those who do not have the virus) should not be housed with FeLV-positive cats (those who do have the virus).

What is FIV and how is it different from FeLV?

FIV is feline immunodeficiency virus. FIV suppresses the cat's immune system and, as the cat ages, his immune system could become more suppressed, allowing the cat to be easily susceptible to other feline infections. However, FIV will not cause life-threatening diseases such as anemia or lymphoma, as FeLV can.

Another difference is in ease of transmission. FIV is not easily transmitted from cat to cat. Serious, aggressive biting is the most common path of infection. Breeding may also allow transmission of the virus. FIV cats can live safely with non-FIV cats, provided the cats are all altered and do not fight and bite.

FeLV is easily transmitted from cat to cat when cats live together and, as stated above, is a much more serious virus. Therefore, housing FeLV cats with non-FeLV cats is not recommended.

Dr. Mike Dix is the medical director for the Best Friends clinic at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary. He works closely with the other Best Friends veterinarians and the rest of the medical team to provide care to the sanctuary's 1,700-plus animal residents.