



What You Need to Know About Feline Leukemia (FeLV)

What is Feline Leukemia?

Feline Leukemia is a viral disease seen only in cats. It can't be transmitted to humans (even children) or to dogs or any other species. Between 3 and 4 percent of the general cat population in the United States is infected with feline leukemia virus, but high-risk groups, such as multiple-cat households, cat-breeding facilities and outdoor cat populations, suffer about a 7 percent infection rate.

It is caused by a retrovirus that infects the cat's cells and reprograms them to continually produce copies of the virus. This produces a condition in the cat called *persistent viremia*, which makes the disease impossible to cure.

What is the SFAS's policy for Feline Leukemia testing?

SFAS tests every cat for Feline Leukemia. However, it is important to note that an infected cat may not show signs of the disease or test positive for 30-60 days after infection. If adopters are able, they may choose to keep new adoptees in isolation and have them re-tested before introducing them to other cats. Cats who test positive can mount an immune response and defeat the disease, especially kittens. A cat who tests positive may later test negative if they have been able to successfully fight off the virus.

SFAS recommends a second test 30 days after adoption. As always, please consult your veterinarian.

What FeLV does to cats

The virus affects the cat's bone marrow and immune system. An infected cat becomes anemic and is unable to fight off even routine infections.

Cats with feline leukemia are commonly anemic and jaundiced. They experience weight loss, enlarged lymph nodes, poor stamina, lethargy, and immune system suppression.

Since the virus is in the blood, saliva, mucous, urine, and feces of infected cats, other cats can be infected by contact with these bodily fluids. The virus is fragile in the environment, so fairly direct contact is necessary for it to be transmitted. Fighting, sharing food and water bowls, sharing litter boxes, and mutual grooming are the most common means of transmission. The virus can also be transmitted from mother to kittens before birth.

Most cats survive less than two years following diagnosis. How long a particular infected cat will live is impossible to predict. Since the disease affects the immune system, close monitoring for signs of illness and prompt treatment of these illnesses can help prolong the cat's life.

After exposure to the virus, some cats also develop a type of tumor called lymphosarcoma. This is a type of cancer that can affect many different organs, beginning with the lymph nodes and possibly spreading to the intestines, liver, spleen, and brain.

Testing for FeLV

There are two types of blood test available, both of which detect the actual protein of the virus circulating in the blood. The ELISA (or "kit" test) is the one most commonly used in the veterinarian's office. The IFA (immunofluorescence assay) must be performed by a veterinary diagnostic laboratory.

If a cat tests positive for the ELISA test, then a follow-up test with the IFA method will confirm the diagnosis. Each method tests for the disease in different stages, so the veterinarian's interpretation of the test results is necessary.

Treatment

Although a variety of treatments have been tried, presently there is no effective cure for feline leukemia. The cat should be supported with good nutrition and regular veterinary care at the first signs of illness.

Vaccination

There is a vaccine for feline leukemia, which should be given to cats considered to be at risk for exposure. The vaccine is as safe as other commonly used feline vaccines, and is reasonably effective in preventing the disease if the cat is exposed. No vaccine is 100 percent effective, and a small number of cats vaccinated will not be protected. Therefore, even vaccinated cats should not be exposed to infected cats.