

Feline Leukemia Virus

Feline Leukemia (FeLV) is a serious viral disease of cats. About 2-3% of cats in the United States are infected. It does not affect other animals or people. FeLV can be prevented, but not cured.

How Cats Get the Virus

FeLV is spread by close contact between cats. Infected cats shed the virus in most of their body fluids. They spread the disease through fighting or mutual grooming. Mother cats also pass FeLV to their kittens during pregnancy and nursing. Although it is possible for the disease to be spread via contaminated food dishes or litter pans, this mode of transmission is rare. The virus can only survive outside a cats body for a few hours.

What the Disease Does

There are three different stages of FeLV infection. In the first stage of infection, most cats show no symptoms. Some cats are even able to fight off the virus. In the secondary stage of infection, the virus invades the bone marrow tissue. Cats that reach this stage are infected for life. However, many still appear healthy. The third stage occurs when these cats begin to show signs of illness. The time between the second and third stages of infection can range from a few weeks to several years.

FeLV can cause severe immunosuppression, making cats more susceptible to other diseases or parasites. Most of the symptoms seen in FeLV infected cats are actually caused by these secondary invaders. Signs can include fever, swollen lymph nodes, poor appetite, weight loss, dull coat, lethargy, gingivitis and sores in the mouth, eye problems, anemia, vomiting and diarrhea, seizures, and miscarriages in pregnant cats.

Feline Leukemia Virus can also cause cancers such as lymphoma and leukemia. Ultimately, most infected cats die from the virus, from secondary infections or from FeLV-associated cancers.

How to Find Out if Your Cat Has FeLV

Your veterinarian can perform a simple blood test to check for FeLV. Its a good idea to test all new cats, especially if you already have other cats in your household. If your cat is positive, follow-up tests can double check the accuracy of the first one and determine what stage of infection is present.

Caring for FeLV-Positive Cats

Although there is no cure for Feline Leukemia, there are several steps owners can take to keep their FeLV-infected cats as healthy as possible. To protect them from secondary infections and to prevent the spread of the virus, keep your FeLV-positive cat indoors, separated from other cats. Keep him up to date on his routine veterinary care and vaccinations. In the final stage of infection, treatment is given for secondary infections and to reduce symptoms. Immunomodulators and antiviral drugs may also be considered.

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Preventing FeLV

Because FeLV cannot be cured, prevention is crucial. Keeping cats indoors prevents exposure to infected cats. Cats that do go outside should be spayed or neutered to reduce the likelihood of fighting or mating. Vaccinations are available for cats at risk for exposure. Remember that infected cats should be kept separate from uninfected cats. When adding a new cat to a household with other cats, test the new cat before it meets its housemates.

