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Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV)

Feline leukemia virus is a retrovirus belonging to the oncornavirus subfamily, which means it is a cancer-causing virus. A confirmed positive test result should be considered only an indication of retrovirus infection, not clinical disease. Diseases in cats infected with FeLV or FIV may not necessarily be a result of retrovirus infection.

FeLV can cause severe anemia and suppress the cat's immune system, leaving the cat vulnerable to a variety of opportunistic diseases. Infected cats shed FeLV primarily in their saliva, although the virus is also present in the blood, tears, feces, and urine. Most cats acquire FeLV from their infected mothers or through bite wounds from fighting. Other modes of FeLV transmission include mutual grooming and sharing food dishes. FeLV cannot survive very long outside a cat's body. The virus loses its infectivity within minutes or hours if left at room temperature (longer if in a humid environment), and it can easily be destroyed with most disinfectants and detergents.

How FeLV Exposure Affects a Cat

One of three things can happen when a cat is exposed to FeLV:

1. The cat may experience a transient viral infection and then fight off the virus, developing future immunity. There is evidence that up to 70 to 80% of adult cats exposed to FeLV survive the initial stage of infection and acquire immunity. Kittens under 16 weeks are much less likely to overcome a viral attack.
2. If the cat does not overcome the initial infection, the virus eventually moves to the bone marrow, and the cat becomes persistently infected, or viremic, with a compromised immune system. Even though a viremic cat may be asymptomatic for several years, she will usually develop FeLV-related diseases at some point. Persistently infected cats can shed the virus at anytime throughout their lives.
3. If the cat becomes persistently infected, but shows no evidence of disease, she is able to produce an effective immune response to the infection while continuing to harbor the virus somewhere in the body—she can be a carrier who doesn't get sick but can infect other cats. A latently infected cat does not appear to be susceptible to FeLV-related diseases and does not shed the virus the way a persistently infected cat does. The latent phase of a FeLV infection seems to be temporary for most cats, which become free of the virus within a few years after the infection occurs. However, latently infected cats do occasionally become viremic.

Against FeLV Testing

Because of the reasons stated previously—including low rate of disease, low likelihood of transmission, and the costs of testing—Alley Cat Allies does not support testing feral cats for FeLV.

Another reason is that FeLV tests can provide inconclusive results:

- A cat in the initial stage of FeLV infection may actually test negative.
- A cat exposed to FeLV may test positive during the transient phase of the infection and then test negative if the virus is overcome.
- It is possible for a quick test to register a false positive result.

Treatment

Although there is no known cure, if you do encounter a feral cat who does have FeLV, supportive care can improve her health and prolong her life. Supportive care includes:

- Good nutrition;
- Minimization of stress;
- Prompt treatment of illness;
- New treatments known as immunotherapies are said to boost an infected cat's weakened immune system. These therapies are popular, but their effectiveness are largely unproven. For more information about immunotherapy, visit



Step-by-Step

1. [Special Considerations and Equipment Necessary for Handling a Feral Cat](#)
2. [Protocols](#)
 - i. [Testing](#)
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Tools

[Learn more about FIV »](#)

"Feline Leukemia (FeLV) Treatments Page" at www.angelfire.com/il/felv.

Read more complete information about selection and interpretation of FeLV and FIV tests and management suggestions for infected cats from the American Association of Feline Practitioners.

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