

FELINE LEUKEMIA VIRUS INFECTION AND FELINE IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS INFECTION

Feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) are two of the most deadly viruses affecting cats today. Both diseases weaken the cat's immune system, making the cat more susceptible to other diseases and infections. FIV is similar to HIV (the cause of AIDS in people) and causes an AIDS-like illness in cats. However, it is highly species-specific, and there is no evidence that it can be transmitted to humans.

How are FeLV and FIV spread?

Typically, FeLV is passed from cat to cat through casual contact, licking, and grooming. The virus enters a cat's body through the eyes, nose, and mouth. From there it travels through the bloodstream infecting tissues and organs. FeLV can also be transmitted in-utero (before birth) and is known to be spread through urine and feces.

FIV transmission is associated with more aggressive contact such as biting, and is therefore more common in outdoor unneutered male cats that are likely to fight.

Both viruses are short-lived outside the animal's body and are readily destroyed by disinfectants.

How likely is my cat to contract these diseases?

Because FeLV is transmitted through casual contact, cats that come in contact with an infected cat (outside or in the same household) can become infected. FIV is less likely to be transmitted among housemates since it is transmitted mostly through biting. We have seen households with multiple cats where only one is positive with FIV for several years without transmission to the others (as long as they do not fight amongst themselves), although there is no guarantee transmission will not occur. Outdoor cats or cats exposed to outdoor cats are at higher risk for both diseases. Aggressive male cats are most at risk for FIV.

What symptoms should I watch for?

Both viruses affect cats in much the same way as the AIDS virus affects humans. They weaken the cat's immune system, often leaving the animal susceptible to diseases it would otherwise be able to fight. FeLV can also lead to tumor growth and various cancers, including leukemia and lymphoma. FeLV and FIV infections are contagious, incurable, and often fatal, although not all cats that are exposed to the viruses become infected. Some will ward off the infection and develop immunity to the viruses. Some cats infected with FeLV become latent carriers—they usually do not become ill, but they may spread the disease or become ill at a later time. Occasionally, a cat may actually clear the virus, but this is rare.

The infections occur in two stages. During the initial phase of each disease, many infected cats appear healthy.

Therefore, many cats go through Stage 1 with the disease unnoticed by their owners. Generally, problems are not detected until Stage 2, when the immune system weakens and other infections occur. If you notice any of the following warning signs, you should immediately consult your veterinarian: swollen lymph nodes, fever, poor coat condition, lethargy, loss of appetite, weight loss, persistent diarrhea, oral lesions or sores, skin, urinary, and upper respiratory tract infections, reproductive disorders, anemia (pale gums), weakness, and persistent or recurrent bacterial infections (often abscesses).

How can I protect my cat from FeLV and FIV?

Prevention is the key to protection. Some precautions to consider are:

- keep cats indoors,
- neuter male cats to reduce the urge to roam and fight,
- have any new cat or kitten tested before bringing it into a household with other cats,
- vaccinate your cat for FeLV if at risk. A vaccine is now also available for FIV, but is not widely recommended due to its somewhat poor efficacy, and the fact that it will cause FIV tests to be positive after vaccination, complicating diagnosis.

How is infection detected?

Blood tests are available through your veterinarian to determine if a cat is infected with each virus. Screening of new cats, such as strays or cats adopted from an animal shelter, is recommended prior to the introduction of these cats into a household with other cats.

What is the recommended care and treatment for an infected cat?

In general, FeLV-positive or FIV-positive cats should be confined indoors to reduce the chances of transmitting the diseases to other cats and to limit exposure to other infections. FeLV-infected cats should be isolated from other cats in the household, especially if the other cat(s) are not vaccinated. Regular veterinary checkups should be scheduled to monitor the cat's condition and to treat any secondary infections as quickly as possible. In addition, infected cats should be provided with a healthy diet, plenty of fresh water, and a stress-free environment. Some treatments to strengthen the immune system are sometimes tried, but tend to be expensive and with questionable benefits.

Depending on the stage at which the disease is detected, many cats that become infected with FeLV or FIV may continue to live normal, happy lives for several years. However, those diagnosed with severe problems, have a poor prognosis.