

Feline Leukaemia Virus (FeLV)



CATS PROTECTION
VETERINARY GUIDES



FeLV is a virus that causes a fatal disease in cats by affecting the immune system. It can cause vulnerability to other infections, anaemia or tumours. It does not infect humans.

How do cats catch FeLV?

The virus is usually transmitted through direct contact with the saliva of infected cats, commonly through grooming. It can also be transmitted from an infected mother to her kittens while they are in the womb or through her milk.

Do all cats that get the virus become permanently infected?

No, after testing positive for the virus, some cats are able to clear the infection and recover after a few weeks. These cats are likely to have a degree of immunity to future infection. The younger or weaker a cat is at the time of infection and the more contact he has with the virus, the more likely he is to remain permanently infected. Although natural resistance to the virus may gradually improve as a cat ages, older cats can still become permanently infected.

What are the signs of FeLV?

There is an incubation period of months or years before signs of infection show in those cats that are permanently infected. Sadly, around 80 per cent of cats diagnosed with FeLV die within three-and-a-half years.

Many different signs can be seen, including:

- recurrent infection, eg with respiratory infections, sore gums or digestive problems
- being 'off-colour' or having a high temperature
- enlarged lymph nodes, eg internally or around the throat, armpit, groin or knee regions
- anaemia
- taking a long time to recover from infections
- breeding problems

How do I have my cat tested for FeLV?

Vets can quickly perform a test to detect the virus in blood. It is recommended that positive results (particularly those from otherwise healthy cats) are sent for confirmation at an external laboratory, as false positive results can occur. As some cats are able to clear the infection after a few weeks, it may also be prudent to re-test four to twelve weeks after a first positive test result.

Results can be inaccurate if the cat has only recently been exposed to the virus, as it can take up to eight weeks for the infection to show in the blood. It is recommended that you wait this time before re-testing negative cats if they are known to have had direct contact with other FeLV-positive cats. FeLV-negative cats should be kept separate from FeLV-positive cats during this period.

Is there any treatment for FeLV?

Unfortunately, there is currently no reliable treatment for FeLV so vets will treat each FeLV-positive cat individually, depending on the signs he develops.

Keeping infected cats indoors and ensuring they are fully vaccinated will help to protect them from other infections, as well as helping to prevent the spread of FeLV to other cats. Any secondary recurrent infections may be treated with antibiotics and/or anti-inflammatory drugs as necessary.

Sadly, many affected cats have to be euthanased because they have a poor quality of life.

Cats Protection recommends that FeLV-positive cats are kept indoors and only allowed outside in an impenetrable garden or safe run. They should not be allowed contact with any FeLV-negative cats.

Can I protect my cat against FeLV?

A very effective vaccine is available to protect uninfected cats against FeLV but, if a cat is already infected, it has no benefit. However, protection cannot be guaranteed and, therefore, it is recommended that FeLV-positive cats are not mixed with FeLV-negative cats – vaccinated or not.

The amount of FeLV in the cat population has reduced significantly since the introduction of vaccines but it is vitally important that you take your cat for annual boosters to maintain his protection and help control FeLV in your area.

I have recently lost my cat to FeLV – can I get another cat?

The virus does not survive long in the environment so it is safe to bring a new cat into the house 24 hours after losing a FeLV-positive cat. It is advisable to disinfect the food bowls and litter trays before using them again. However, if you already have other cats, it is advisable to wait eight weeks and then to test them for the virus before introducing another cat.

This leaflet is one of a range provided by Cats Protection on issues surrounding cat care.

Cats Protection is the UK's leading feline welfare charity and helps more than 193,000 cats and kittens each year. We rely entirely on public generosity to finance this vital welfare work.

For more information on **adopting a cat**, **volunteering for us** or **making a donation**, visit **www.cats.org.uk**



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