

UNDERSTANDING



FELINE IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS (FIV).

FELINE LEUKEMIA VIRUS (FELV) & TESTING

FIV

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) is one of the most common and consequential infectious diseases of cats around the world. In infected cats, FIV attacks the immune system, leaving the cat vulnerable to many other infections.

FeLV

Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) is one of the most common infectious diseases in cats, affecting between 2-3% of all cats in the United States and Canada. FeLV is a type of virus called a retrovirus, meaning it can be incorporated into a cat's genome and may not be cleared over time.

FELINE IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS (FIV)

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) ranks among the most prevalent and significant infectious diseases affecting cats globally. Once a cat is infected, FIV compromises the immune system, making the feline susceptible to a variety of other infections. While infected cats may seem healthy for several years, they ultimately experience immune deficiency, which allows typically harmless bacteria, viruses, protozoa, and fungi from their surroundings to potentially lead to serious illnesses. Although there is currently no cure for FIV, recent research indicates that cats with the virus can often live average lifespans, provided they are not also infected with feline leukemia virus.

There are three phases of FIV infection:

- Acute phase: occurs 1-3 months after infection, with virus replication in lymph nodes leading to mild symptoms like fever and lack of appetite.
- Asymptomatic phase: can last for months to years with slow virus replication and no outward signs of illness, though blood abnormalities may be present.
- Progressive phase: leads to an immunocompromised state with secondary infections causing most illnesses, including chronic infections, dental issues, cancer, and neurological disorders. Survival time is limited once multiple critical infections or cancers develop.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- FIV IS AN INFECTIOUS VIRUS THAT RESEMBLES HIV IN HUMANS, WHICH IS WHY IT IS OFTEN REFERRED TO AS FELINE AIDS; HOWEVER, IT IS EXCLUSIVE TO CATS.
- THIS VIRUS IS HIGHLY SPECIFIC TO FELINES AND DOES NOT INFECT OR CAUSE DISEASE IN HUMANS, AS THERE IS CURRENTLY NO EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT SUCH TRANSMISSION.
- FELINE IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS (FIV) IS AN ILLNESS THAT IS TRANSMITTED AMONG CATS, TYPICALLY THROUGH DEEP BITE WOUNDS, WITH THE SALIVA OF AN INFECTED CAT BEING THE PRIMARY MODE OF TRANSMISSION.
- *IN RARER INSTANCES, IT CAN ALSO SPREAD THROUGH INFECTED MILK, CONTAMINATED BLOOD TRANSFUSIONS, OR DURING PREGNANCY FROM A MOTHER CAT TO HER KITTENS. **SEE NOTES ON TESTING PAGE*

Since most cats contract FIV through bite wounds from fights, you can greatly reduce the risk of infection by ensuring your cat is neutered and kept indoors. Currently, there is no available vaccine for this virus.

FELINE LEUKEMIA VIRUS (FELV)

Feline leukemia virus (FeLV) is one of the most common infectious diseases affecting cats. In the U.S. and Canada, it impacts about 2-3% of the feline population, but the rates can rise to as much as 30% among sick or high-risk cats. Fortunately, thanks to the development of effective vaccines and accurate testing methods, the incidence of FeLV in cats has significantly decreased over the past 25 years.

FeLV is classified as a retrovirus, which means it can integrate into a cat's genome and may not be eliminated over time. Cats that are persistently infected release infectious viral particles in their saliva, urine, feces, and milk. Close interactions among cats can facilitate the spread of FeLV, including through bite wounds, grooming, or sharing food and litter. Additionally, transmission can occur from an infected mother cat to her kittens, either during pregnancy or while nursing. The virus does not survive long outside a cat's body—likely less than a few hours in typical household conditions—making it unlikely for a cat to contract the virus from the environment without extended close contact with an infected cat.

After a cat is exposed to FeLV, its body may respond to the virus in several ways, resulting in abortive, regressive, or progressive infections. In certain cases, a cat can effectively mount an immune response, completely eliminating the virus before it integrates into the cat's genome. This scenario is classified as an abortive infection, during which all direct tests for the virus will return negative results. These cats will develop antibodies against FeLV and are deemed immune to the disease. Although abortive infections were previously regarded as quite uncommon, recent studies utilizing advanced testing methods indicate that at least 20-30% of cats exposed to FeLV experience an abortive infection. Cats in this category will never test positive for FeLV through standard tests nor exhibit clinical symptoms of the disease, meaning that both owners and veterinarians might remain unaware of any past infection with the virus.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- THE ONLY SURE WAY TO PROTECT CATS FROM FELV IS TO PREVENT THEIR EXPOSURE TO FELV-INFECTED CATS. KEEPING CATS INDOORS, AWAY FROM POTENTIALLY INFECTED CATS.
- CATS WITH FELV CAN LEAD NORMAL LIVES FOR EXTENDED PERIODS, WITH A MEDIAN SURVIVAL TIME OF AROUND 2.5 YEARS, POTENTIALLY LONGER FOR THOSE WITH REGRESSIVE INFECTION.
- CATS SHOULD BE TESTED FOR FELV PRIOR TO INTRODUCING THEM INTO A HOME, AND INFECTION-FREE CATS SHOULD BE HOUSED SEPARATELY FROM INFECTED CATS. FOOD AND WATER BOWLS AND LITTER BOXES SHOULD NOT BE SHARED BETWEEN FELV-INFECTED CATS AND NON-INFECTED CATS.
- VACCINATION FOR FELV IS RECOMMENDED TO REDUCE THE RISK OF INFECTION FOR CATS, ESPECIALLY THOSE AT RISK OF EXPOSURE. IT IS NOW A CORE VACCINE FOR KITTENS TO PREVENT PROGRESSIVE INFECTION.

TESTING FOR FIV and FeLV

Understanding Adult vs. Kitten Testing

✦ All Cats Should Be Tested For FIV/FeLV ✦



At A Home of Their Own Animal Rescue, before being accepted into our cat adoption program or placed in foster homes, all adult cats and kittens older than 8 weeks have undergone FIV/FeLV testing and received negative results.

The following pages aim to guide applicants and adopters in understanding the testing procedures we implement within our organization. We hope that the information shared will help build confidence in applicants and adopters, demonstrating that our Cat Program has taken every recommended step to ascertain the FIV / FeLV negative status of each rescue cat and kitten to the best of our capabilities.

UNFORTUNATELY, WE ARE CURRENTLY UNABLE TO ACCEPT ANY CATS THAT TEST POSITIVE FOR EITHER FIV OR FELV, AS WE DO NOT HAVE THE RESOURCES TO PROVIDE ADEQUATE CARE FOR THESE INFECTED ANIMALS AT THIS TIME.

Testing of Adult Cats & Kittens over 8-weeks-old

Our rescue cats generally join our adoption program by either transfer from a partner shelter or through individuals in our community who are seeking help with a cat they own or one that needs a home.

No matter the circumstances under which a cat joins our organization, it is essential to obtain medical records from the shelter or veterinary office confirming that the cat has tested negative for FIV/FeLV. This documentation is collected by our Cat Adoption Team prior to the cat's arrival or acceptance into our program.

FIV Testing

FIV is identified through blood tests that check for antibodies to the virus. A positive result indicates that the cat has generated antibodies, suggesting it has been, and likely continues to be, infected. It is generally accepted that once a cat contracts the FIV virus, it will remain infected for life. However, it remains uncertain whether all infected cats will develop clinical signs of illness.

Negative FIV test results are considered reliable and trustworthy proof that the cat is not infected with the virus.

FeLV Testing

FeLV screening tests detect the presence of viral antigens (viral proteins) in a blood sample. A positive result suggests viremia, indicating that the virus is present. This means the cat is unlikely to clear the FeLV virus from its system.

On the other hand, a negative test result is widely considered strong evidence that an adult cat or kitten older than 8 weeks does not have FeLV disease.

Testing a Mother Cat and her Kittens – Under 8-weeks-old

Additional factors must be considered with young kitten's testing.

It is quite common for our Cat Adoption Program to receive requests for the rescue of a mother cat and her young kittens. In these cases, we consider additional factors regarding FIV/FelV testing by following the recommendations of our partner veterinarian, along with the most recent kitten testing guidelines available to us.

WHEN RESCUING A MOTHER CAT AND HER YOUNG KITTENS, OUR PROTOCOL IS TO ENSURE THAT THE MOTHER CAT TESTS NEGATIVE FOR BOTH FIV AND FELV BEFORE ACCEPTING HER AND HER KITTENS INTO OUR ADOPTION PROGRAM OR A FOSTER HOME. HOWEVER, THE YOUNG KITTENS (UNDER 8 WEEKS OLD) ARE NOT INDIVIDUALLY TESTED BASED ON THE RECOMMENDATION OF VETERINARY PROFESSIONALS.

As mentioned on the previous page regarding testing for adult cats and kittens older than eight weeks, both negative FIV and FelV test results are viewed as dependable evidence that a cat is not infected with the viruses. Therefore, it is generally safe to assume that if a mother cat tests negative for both viruses, her kittens will also be negative. However, there is a possibility of obtaining a false positive result in a young kitten, as its mother may have transmitted her antibodies for these viruses.

Testing very young, often still nursing kittens can produce inaccurate results

FIV ✨ FIV is less likely to be transmitted from mother to kitten compared to FelV.

- IT IS UNCOMMON FOR AN INFECTED MOTHER CAT TO PASS AN FIV INFECTION TO HER KITTENS.
- HOWEVER, IF THE MOTHER CONTRACTS FIV DURING PREGNANCY, THE RISK OF TRANSMISSION RISES.
- IT'S IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT SEXUAL CONTACT IS NOT A MAJOR METHOD OF SPREADING FIV AMONG CATS.

FelV

- INFECTED CATS RELEASE INFECTIOUS VIRAL PARTICLES THROUGH THEIR SALIVA, AS WELL AS IN THEIR FECES, URINE, AND MILK.
- CLOSE INTERACTIONS BETWEEN CATS CAN FACILITATE THE SPREAD OF FELV, WHICH INCLUDES SCENARIOS SUCH AS BITE WOUNDS, MUTUAL GROOMING, AND SHARING FEEDING DISHES OR LITTER BOXES.
- ADDITIONALLY, TRANSMISSION CAN OCCUR FROM AN INFECTED MOTHER CAT TO HER KITTENS, BOTH BEFORE BIRTH AND DURING NURSING.

If an adopted kitten falls into this particular category, the adopter will receive the mother cat's negative test results for their records.

WE HIGHLY RECOMMEND HAVING YOUR KITTEN TESTED FOR FIV/FELV AT SIX MONTHS OLD, REGARDLESS OF THE MOTHER'S TEST OUTCOMES.

IT IS CRUCIAL TO TEST AND MAINTAIN RECORDS REFLECTING YOUR CAT'S FIV/FELV STATUS.