



## Feline Leukemia and FIV

**\*Because of the low prevalence and high cost of testing, SHS will no longer be including Feline Leukemia/FIV testing as part of our adoption package. If you choose a kitten less than 6 months of age, SHS recommends that you speak with your veterinarian about when you should have your kitten tested for these viruses. Adopters should discuss with their veterinarian about Feline Leukemia and FIV testing at their 10 day wellness checkup. \***

**Feline leukemia virus (FeLV)** and **feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV)** are contagious, untreatable diseases in cats. Cats that go outside are at increased risk for exposure to **FeLV and FIV**. Testing for **FeLV and FIV** is often performed at the same time since clinical signs can be similar. Many people confuse FIV with feline leukemia virus (FeLV). Although these diseases are in the same retrovirus family and cause many similar secondary conditions FeLV and FIV are different diseases.

### Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) and FIV

#### How is it transmitted?

- Saliva
- Nasal secretions
- Urine
- Feces
- Milk from nursing mothers
- Grooming behaviors
- Fighting and blood transfer

**Symptoms – If you see any of these symptoms you should take them to your veterinarian. These symptoms do not necessarily mean your cat has either virus.**

- Enlarged lymph nodes
- Fever
- Anemia
- Weight loss
- Disheveled coat
- Poor appetite
- Diarrhea
- Abnormal appearance or inflammation of the eye (conjunctivitis)
- Inflammation of the gums (gingivitis)
- Inflammation of the mouth (stomatitis)
- Dental disease
- Skin redness or hair loss
- Wounds that don't heal
- Sneezing
- Discharge from eyes or nose
- Frequent urination, straining to urinate or urinating outside of litter box
- Behavior change



## **Feline Leukemia and FIV**

### **Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV)**

The number of U.S. cats with FeLV is similar to FIV statistics – about three percent of healthy cats are infected with FeLV and 13 percent or more of very young and ill cats.

Fortunately, the virus doesn't live long outside the host's body – generally less than four hours in a normal household.

**There's no scientific evidence that FeLV or FIV can be transmitted from your cat to you.**

However, FeLV-positive cats are at higher risk of carrying other diseases because of their compromised immune system.

### **How FeLV Affects Cats**

The feline leukemia virus is the most common cause of cancer in cats. It also plays a role in blood disorders and like FIV, can lead to a weakened immune system and secondary infections. In the early stage of FeLV infection, similar to an FIV infection, your cat may show no symptoms at all. But over time – weeks to months to even years – your pet's health will gradually deteriorate. Or, he might have periods of relatively good health interspersed with recurring secondary illnesses.

### **Diagnosis and Management of FeLV**

Your vet will use either an ELISA (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay) or similar blood test or an IFA (indirect immunofluorescent antibody assay) blood test to diagnose your pet. The IFA test picks up secondary viremia only, so if your cat tests positive, the infection will be with her for the remainder of her life.

### **FIV**

Cats who are infected with feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) may not show symptoms until years after the initial infection occurred. Although the virus is slow-acting, a cat's immune system is severely weakened once the disease takes hold.

### **Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV)**

FIV is classified as a lentivirus, or a 'slow virus,' meaning it has a long incubation period. If your cat has contracted the virus, you may not know it for years. Eventually, though, the infection can create immune deficiency and your kitty's body won't be able to adequately defend against other infections.

### **Symptoms of FIV**

Early in an FIV infection, there can be temporary enlargement of the lymph nodes, often with fever. But you may not even notice this stage of infection unless the lymph nodes are noticeably enlarged.



## **Feline Leukemia and FIV**

Some FIV-positive cats experience a progressive deterioration of their health. Others have recurring illness in between periods of apparent good health. Signs of immunodeficiency often don't appear for years after infection.

### **Diagnosis**

An antibody test will be performed by your vet to see if there are antibodies to the virus present in your cat's blood. The presence of antibodies indicates FIV infection. However, false-positives do occur, so many veterinarians confirm initial positive results with a different test.

Kittens born to FIV-positive mother cats often test positive for several months after birth. Fortunately, few of these babies are actually infected. FIV-positive kittens younger than six months should be retested about every 60 days until at least the age of six months.

If you know or suspect your kitty might have been exposed (bitten, most likely) by an FIV-infected cat, or even an unknown cat, you should have your pet retested 60 days after exposure.

### **Caring for an FIV-Positive Cat**

If your kitty is diagnosed with FIV, she should be kept indoors. This will prevent spread of the virus to cats outside your home, and will reduce the risk your pet will be exposed to pathogens that her immune system can't defend against.

If you haven't already, you should spay or neuter your FIV-positive cat.

Many cats with FIV live normal or near-normal life spans with good quality care. But it's impossible to predict how long or how well your cat will survive after diagnosis. Cats that develop serious illnesses secondary to an FIV infection have a less hopeful prognosis, as do kitties with persistent fever and progressive weight loss.

The good news is an FIV infection should not be a death sentence for your cat. This virus degrades the immune system over time, so proactive care can allow FIV infected cats to live a completely normal life, in most cases.

### **Keeping Cats Safe from FIV and FeLV Infections**

The only guaranteed way to keep your cat safe is to prevent exposure to these viruses.

Keep your cat indoors, away from potentially infected cats. If you want to let your pet outdoors in nice weather, either provide constant supervision or make sure he is safe in an enclosure he can't get out of, and no other cat can get in to. Also make sure no one can be bitten through the sides or top of the enclosure.

There have been many instances of FIV positive and negative cats living in the same house, without disease transfer. The key is to prevent cat fights (biting), which is how the virus is spread. So if you choose to blend FIV positive and negative cats in one house make sure everyone is spayed or neutered and introduce them slowly to avoid bite wounds.