



FeLV Facts

Interested in adopting a FeLV positive cat? That's great!

Here are the answers to the most common questions related to FeLV.

What is FeLV?

FeLV stands for “Feline Leukemia Virus”. It is a contagious viral disease that weakens and suppresses a cat’s immune system, making FeLV positive cats more susceptible to common health issues, such as upper respiratory infections, dental disease, etc. In the United States, approximately 2-3% of the cat population will test positive for Feline Leukemia.

How is FeLV spread?

FeLV is spread from a positive cat to other cats through body secretions, including saliva, nasal secretions, urine, feces and milk from mother cats. This means that that FeLV can be spread through mutual grooming, bites, shared food/water bowls and litter boxes, and nursing. The virus does not survive outside of a cat’s body for more than a few hours and can be easily killed with regular washing/sanitizing.

How do you know if a cat is FeLV positive?

Prior to being made available for adoption, each cat at Homeward Animal Shelter has a blood test, called an ELISA test, ran to ensure they are negative for FeLV. Cats that test positive do not necessarily have Feline Leukemia, but may have been exposed to the virus and their body may still be in the process of fighting it off. To determine if a cat is truly positive, a specific test, call an IFA, is performed. If the IFA is positive, it means that the virus has moved into the cat’s bone marrow and their body will be unlikely to fight off the virus at this stage, and the cat is considered positive/infected with FeLV. Even if the virus has moved into the bone marrow, as long as the cat is not showing any other type of illness, they may still live several years with proper care.

Can there be “false positives” on tests?

Yes. ELISA tests can have false positives if the cat is currently fighting off the virus. The ELISA tests look for virus particles in the blood, and just because the test is positive, it does not mean they are actually infected. Some cats have been known to test negative a few months after testing positive on an ELISA test. This means that the cat was never truly infected and that their body was able to fight the virus. A negative IFA, however, does not mean that the cat is in the clear; it only means that the virus has not yet reached the bone marrow. There is still a possibility that the cat will test positive in the future. We recommend having cats that test positive on the ELISA test, but negative on the IFA test, be tested again in 2-3 months to ensure they are actually negative.

Can people or dogs get FeLV?

No. FeLV is species-specific to cats and can only be transmitted from cat to cat; humans, dogs, and all other species of animals besides cats can not become infected with Feline Leukemia. FeLV positive cats can live with other animals, however, because of the contagious nature of the virus, should not live with FeLV negative cats.

Can FeLV positive cats live with FeLV negative cats?

It is recommended that negative cats not live with positive cats. There is a vaccination for FeLV, however, it is only 85% effective and may not protect a negative cat from becoming infected. FeLV positive cats can live with other positive cats without issue.

What quality of life will a FeLV positive cat have?

There are no specific signs of FeLV, but positive cats can become sick easier because of their weakened immune system. Most FeLV positive cats will live normal lives, however, their lifespan will likely be significantly shortened. Cats infected as adults are more likely to live healthier lives than cats who were infected as kittens. Sadly, cats infected as kittens have an average lifespan of just two years.

Is there any special veterinary care needed?

A FeLV positive cat will be more susceptible to illnesses, so any signs of illness should be examined by a veterinarian. A high quality diet, low-stress environment and regular veterinary care are beneficial to a FeLV positive cat.

Is there a cure or treatment for FeLV?

Unfortunately, there is no specific treatment or cure for FeLV. When illnesses arise, they are treated symptomatically. It's important to be aware that FeLV positive cats will likely live shorter lifespans and your veterinarian will be able to provide you guidance through illnesses that may shorten the lifespan of a FeLV positive cat.

What should you consider before adopting?

One thing to keep in mind is that we cannot guarantee the lifespan of a FeLV positive cat. Some may only live a few months and others may live several years. Depending upon how quickly the infection spreads and how weakened the cat's immune system becomes, FeLV positive cats may require more regular veterinary care. FeLV positive cats are special felines who deserve to live out their lives in a special home like yours!

For more information, check out:

http://www.vet.cornell.edu/fhc/Health_Information/brochure_felv.cfm

<http://bestfriends.org/stories-blog-videos/latest-news/feline-leukemia-misconceptions>