



Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV)

Frequently Asked Questions

Background

Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) is a virus that is specific to cats that attacks and weakens a cat's immune system. Cats with FeLV can live normal, happy, healthy lives—with a shorter life expectancy than cats without FeLV. In the past, cats with FeLV in shelters were euthanized as soon as they were diagnosed. PAWS takes a different stance: we enable FeLV+ cats to live out their lives in loving homes.

How is FeLV spread?

FeLV is spread from cat to cat through “social” behaviors such as grooming, nursing, sharing food or water bowls, sharing litter boxes, fighting, or mating. Transmission requires cats to be in close contact and sharing saliva or other bodily fluids. The FeLV virus is very unstable and does not survive for long in the environment, making it hard to spread unless cats are in direct close contact with each other. You do not need to worry about the virus spreading on your clothes or on guests who come to visit (unless that guest happens to be a cat, which is not recommended).

Can my dog/rabbit/iguana/child/grandmother get FeLV?

No. FeLV is species specific to cats, which means only cats can acquire, transmit, and become ill from the virus. Your dog or other pets will not get FeLV.

Your cats, however, are at risk, which is why PAWS will not adopt known FeLV+ cats to homes that have FeLV negative or untested cats. For this reason, known FeLV+ cats are only adopted out to homes where they will be the only cat, or to homes where there are other known FeLV+ cats. Since FeLV can be transmitted to other cats, it is recommended that FeLV+ cats are kept indoors only.

How is FeLV diagnosed?

FeLV is diagnosed on a blood test. The test can be run at PAWS or any other veterinary clinic and takes about 15 minutes to run. The test is very reliable, but there is the chance for false positive and false negative results. The test is also not very good at identifying recent infections, which is why we recommend testing at least 60 days after the last known possible exposure to FeLV.

Do FeLV+ cats need special medication or care?

As long as an FeLV+ cat is healthy, it does not need any special medical care or medication. However, since the virus weakens a cat's immune system, FeLV+ cats may be severely affected by infections that other cats can fight off or get over quickly. Increased stress can lead to a more severe infection, so keeping FeLV+ cats in low-stress environments is important, as well as regular vet visits, and addressing health problems as soon as they arise. When FeLV+ cats do get sick, they usually get very sick quickly and will need immediate medical attention and treatment.

How is the PAWS adoption process different for a FeLV+ cat?

PAWS waives adoption fees for FeLV+ cats, and our clinics can provide discounted treatment and palliative care for illnesses related to the viral infection. Palliative care focuses on improving cats' quality of life, not curing the virus. It may include:

- Basic laboratory testing and diagnostic tests.
- Antibiotics for bacterial infections.
- Pain medication and other supplements
- Specialized diets
- Medications to treat chronic conditions related to suppression of the immune system.

Palliative care does not include:

- Hospitalization
- Advanced imaging
- Referrals to veterinary specialists
- Surgery.

For routine veterinary care (including dental services, vaccines, and yearly wellness exams) or medical issues not related to FeLV, you should visit a full-service veterinarian.

What medical issues should I look for?

Cats can be very sensitive to stress and unfamiliar situations and routines, and stress can lead to illness. Cats are also generally very good at hiding their pain and discomfort. If you adopt a FeLV+ cat, you should know how to spot the symptoms of stress-related illnesses:

- Not eating – if your cat has not eaten in 24 hours, offer them different kinds of wet food (start with the smelliest), chicken or turkey baby food (without onions or garlic), or even scrambled eggs. Contact your veterinarian if your cat is still not eating after 48 hours as it can be dangerous for their health. Three or more days is too long.
- Fever
- Sneezing
- Yellow or green nasal discharge
- Congestion
- Labored breathing
- Lethargy – your new cat should be inquisitive, even if shy. If he/she is unwilling to interact with you, it could be a sign they are getting sick.

What happens when palliative care is no longer effective?

PAWS will make every effort to accommodate adopted FeLV cats when it is time for humane euthanasia and will perform the euthanasia at a PAWS facility at no cost to the adopter. Additional cremation services are at the adopter's expense. PAWS will not reimburse or compensate adopters for care that is performed at other veterinary facilities.