# Feline Disease Facts

To learn about a variety of feline (and canine) diseases and ailments, go to www.dogandcat.com, and click on "Pet Advice". Select an Advice Category from the list or type in a disease or ailment in the search box.

## TESTING FOR FELINE LEUKEMIA (FeLV) AND FELINE IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS (FIV)

The 2001 Report of the American Association of Feline Practitioners and Academy of Feline Medicine Advisory Panel on Feline Retrovirus Testing and Management generated the following General Principles:

- All cats should be tested for infection with feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV).
- Cats infected with FeLV or FIV may live for many years. A decision for euthanasia should NEVER be made solely on the basis of whether or not a cat is infected.
- A confirmed positive test result should be considered only an indication of retrovirus infection, not clinical disease. Diseases in cats infected with FeLV or FIV may not necessarily be a result of retrovirus infection.
- No test is 100% accurate at all times and under all conditions. Therefore, all test results should be interpreted in light of the patient's health and prior likelihood of infection.

Testing for FeLV and FIV can be performed in a veterinarian's office for between $15 and $35 by drawing a small amount of blood. Results are available within 15 minutes.

## WHAT IS FELINE LEUKEMIA VIRUS (FeLV)?

FeLV is a retrovirus that compromises the immune system of an infected cat, leaving it vulnerable to secondary infections and predominantly cancer. It is not contagious to any other species, including humans.

Symptoms include:
- Lack of energy
- Anemia
- Chest and lungs congestion, upper respiratory infections
- Kidney function compromised, urinary tract infections

Transmitted by:
- Saliva, through mutual grooming and sharing food dishes; it is important to note that it is transmitted through repeated exposure to the virus, not very commonly through a single contact, although kittens and geriatric or immune compromised cats would be more susceptible.
- Mother to unborn kittens via blood and latter via nursing

How Exposure Affects a Cat (one of three responses):

- The cat may experience a transient viral infection and fight it off, developing future immunity. Up to 70-80% of adult cats exposed survive this initial stage. Kittens are much less likely to be able to fight it off, due to the fragility of their developing immune systems.
- If a cat does not fight it off initially, the virus moves to the bone marrow where the cat become viremic or persistently infected. Such a cat may go asymptomatic for years, but at some point will develop FeLV-related diseases. It is very important, for this reason, to provide a FeLV positive cat a safe, healthy and stress free environment to prolong the asymptomatic or dormant stage for as long as possible. A cat in this stage is contagious at all times, shedding the virus to all cats he or she comes in contact with, so it is also important to limit outdoor activity and exposure to disease negative cats.
- The third scenario is that a cat is able to launch an effective immune response to infection yet continue to carry the virus. In this stage, a cat is not susceptible to FeLV-related diseases and is not contagious. This latent stage for positive cats seems to be temporary in most cases and these cats in a few years shed the virus completely. Occasionally however, a latently infected cat will become persistently infected.
- Between 60-70% of the adult cat community has a natural immunity to the virus. There is a vaccine for the FeLV, but it is only reported as being between 45 and 90% effective.

**WHAT IS FELINE IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS (FIV)?**

FIV is a relatively new disease, first discovered in 1986. It is caused by a virus in the AIDS family, but is not contagious to any other species, including humans. It weakens the immune system of the cat similar to FeLV. Unlike FeLV, is does not cause cancer but leaves the animal vulnerable to a wide array of bacteria, viruses and fungi that normally are harmless to a healthy animal. Fortunately FIV is not as easily transmitted as FeLV.

Symptoms include:

- Run down appearance, lethargy, loss of appetite
- Severe gingivitis or painful inflamed gums
- Fever and swollen glands
- Kidney and intestinal infections, neurological problems

Transmitted by:

- Can be contracted at birth, but it is uncommon and is often reversed as the kitten's immune system develops fully
- Most commonly transmitted through bite wounds or blood to blood contact (unneutered males have highest prevalence), not casual contact like sharing food dishes, grooming, snuggling, etc.

How Exposure Affects a Cat:

- After initial exposure, the virus spreads to the cat's lymph nodes, causing enlargement. A fever and drop in white blood cells may result for a few days or a few weeks.

- During the second stage, the cat may become completely asymptomatic and remain healthy for many years. Like FeLV, during this stage, it is very important to provide a FIV positive cat a safe, healthy and stress free environment to prolong the asymptomatic or dormant stage for as long as possible.
- During the third chronic stage, the cat develops signs of immunodeficiency outlined above.
- The diagnosis of FIV is not necessarily cause for alarm. The virus, known as a lentivirus or slow moving, having a long incubation period, so a cat who is positive can live a happy and healthy life for many years. Since it does not spread through casual contact, it is possible to keep FIV-infected cats in the same household as uninfected cats safely, provided they are tolerant of each other and are not fighting.
- Between 60-70% of the adult cat community has a natural immunity to the virus. Although there is no vaccine (possibly available in late summer, 2002) or cure for FIV, 90% of positive testing cats will lead long, healthy, normal lives.

WHAT IF MY CAT TESTS POSITIVE FOR FeLV?

The following websites cover this topic expertly.

**web.vet.cornell.edu/public/fhc/felv.html**

www.geocities.com/~miller-roth/felv.html

**www.cfainc.org/health/FeLV.html**