

Riverside Animal Hospital frequently asked questions about Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) and Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV)

What are FeLV and FIV?

FeLV (feline leukemia virus) is a retrovirus that can cause lymphosarcoma, immunosuppression and suppression of bone marrow. Even though only 2% of the cat population is infected with **FeLV**, it is considered to be the most prevalent cause of severe illness and death in cats.

FIV (Feline immunodeficiency virus) is a lentivirus similar to HIV in people. It causes an AIDS-like immunodeficiency in cats.

How does my cat become infected?

FeLV is most commonly spread by saliva. Transmission through feces, urine, and fleas are less common. **FeLV** has also been shown to shed in the queen's milk. **FeLV** transmission requires close, prolonged direct contact with an infected cat because the virus only lives 24-48 hours outside of the host. Kittens are most susceptible; however, adults can become infected.

FIV is usually spread by blood, most commonly through bite wounds. Intact, free-roaming, male cats are at greatest risk for infection. The average age of infected cats is 5-6 years.

What signs will an infected cat show?

Because **FeLV** is immunosuppressive, vague signs are often seen like lethargy, weight loss, and anorexia. Other signs commonly seen include: lymphosarcoma, anemia, large lymph nodes, urinary incontinence, secondary infections, infertility, abortion, and diseases of the mouth. Some cats that are infected do not show any clinical signs.

FIV can be divided into 3 phases. The acute phase which starts 3-7 weeks after infection and lasts up to 6 months is characterized by big lymph nodes, fever, malaise, diarrhea, and anemia. The latent phase which lasts from months to years is characterized by no symptoms. The chronic stage follows the latent stage and is characterized by infections in the mouth, diarrhea, respiratory infections, urinary tract infections, wasting, fever, ear infections, secondary infections and neurologic signs. After the chronic stage begins, cats usually do not live more than 2 years.

How are the diseases detected?

The most common test for **FeLV** detects the antigen produced by the virus in the blood.

The test for **FIV** detects antibody produced by the body in response to the virus in the blood.

How can FeLV and FIV be prevented?

There is a vaccine available for **FeLV**; however, the efficacy is unknown. It is recommended for cats in high risk groups such as a cattery, multiple cat households or outdoor cats.

There is a new vaccine available for **FIV**. Before cats can be vaccinated for **FIV** they have to be blood tested for the virus. It is also recommended that vaccinated cats be microchipped.

If a cat is **FeLV** or **FIV** positive, it should be isolated from other cats in the household as well as outdoor cats. This will prevent spread of **FeLV** to the other cats by saliva or spread of **FIV** by bite wounds. More importantly this will decrease stress caused by competition with other cats and, it will also decrease possible exposure to other diseases.

Once infected, what treatments are available?

There are no treatments available that will eliminate **FeLV** or **FIV**. Supportive treatment is administered to treat specific symptoms.

Can people become infected with FeLV or FIV?

FeLV and **FIV** are not human health hazards.

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