

***Ask the Vet:* Managing Feline Leukemia Virus**

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Very few challenges in veterinary practice are solved definitively in either a positively correct manner or a positively incorrect manner. This sounds confusing, and it certainly can be. The art of practice is only mastered when the principles of managing and fighting disease are balanced with the varying resources available and the needs of the patients and their families. Black and white clarity is rare.

No common infectious disease better reflects this confusion of grey “somewhat right and somewhat wrong” than the infection of a cat with feline leukemia virus (FeLV). Most feline appreciating people are familiar with this virus by name. Most, unfortunately, remember the name because they are aware that a relative or a friend’s cat died because of infection with the virus. The purpose of this article is to shine light on some practical facts worth knowing about FeLV and squash some misconceptions that are harmful to cats.

Multiple studies of tens of thousands of cats from private homes and shelters reveal that the incidence of FeLV infected cats ranges from 1.1% to 3.4% in North America. In terms of whole numbers, the incidence translates to about 1 to 3 FeLV infected cats per every 100 cats in the general population.

Every kitten or cat infected with FeLV need not be euthanized! Understanding the needs of an infected cat often results in a wonderful pet and family relationship. FeLV is not transmitted to people. In our practice, we have been fortunate to know many cats with persistent FeLV infection that have lived and shared the magical bond with their families. Some of these cats have lived healthfully well into their geriatric years and have beaten the odds of survival predictions limiting them to 2-3 years. We tested and re-tested several of these cats during their lives, because we just could not believe they remained positive. They did. We also tested many other feline housemates who remained free of the virus.

When blood test results identify an infected cat, the cat’s age and health and lifestyle must be used to determine the best next action. Some cats are capable of clearing the virus completely during the first stages of infection. During the period between the initial positive test result and the later confirmatory test, effort should be made to help the cat to be as healthy as possible so it might effectively clear the virus.

Two rules of thumb can help people understand the testing procedures recommended by their veterinarian. First, if a cat’s FeLV blood test is positive for the virus, then a follow up positive confirmation test completed after 3 to 4 months will prove the persistence of the infection. A negative test result 3-4 months after a positive test suggests that the cat was able to effectively fight and clear the virus. Next, the infection of a recently exposed cat may not be at an advanced enough stage of infection to show a positive result for 30 days after the exposure. Thus, a negative result should be confirmed after 30 days.

FeLV causes varying degrees of increased susceptibility to parasite, viral, and bacterial infections. Historically, a greater incidence of blood cell cancer and lymphoma has been reported in FeLV infected cats, but not all infected cats succumb to these diseases. Practical health and lifestyle advice from your veterinarian can help reduce an infected cat’s risk for these problems. In our practice, we do not think of our patients with FeLV infection as unhealthy. We believe their diet and preventive care should be the best possible just like that of all of our patients.

What is the value of blood testing your cat for FeLV? By knowing whether your cat is infected with this common virus or not, you may be better able:

- to help your exposed cat fight a recent infection.
- to help your uninfected cat live a lifestyle that reduces risk of acquiring FeLV.
- to help your infected cat live with lower risk of secondary disease susceptibility.
- to help prevent the spread of the virus to other cats.

Squashing the misconceptions about FeLV among people helps all cats. Please ask your veterinarian whenever you have questions regarding FeLV or any other animal health concerns.