

Your cat just tested positive for Feline Leukemia.... Now what?

FeLV, or Feline Leukemia Virus, is a virus that affects the immune system of a cat. It isn't a form of cancer, but a virus that may weaken the immune system and make opportunistic infections and certain types of cancer more likely. Cats with FeLV can live normal, happy lives—they often have a shorter life expectancy than FeLV negative cats.

Austin Pets Alive! debunks the myth and misconception that FeLV+ cats are sick or suffering and that these cats are unwanted or unadoptable. FeLV+ cats can have the same quality of life as a FeLV negative cat, and can recover from routine illness. FeLV+ cats are highly adoptable as well. APA!'s Feline Leukemia program has adopted thousands of viral-positive cats since its inception. In fact, our research shows a higher adopter satisfaction and attachment rate to FeLV+ cats than to adopted viral negative control cats.

In this toolkit, we will provide the information and resources necessary to give your kitty a happy life, or the steps to take if you plan to rehome him.

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Where do I start?

If your cat (or a cat you have taken in) has tested positive for Feline Leukemia, the first step is to ensure your cat actually has Feline Leukemia.

Ask your vet what type and brand of test was used to diagnose.

Testing should only be performed on an IDEXX SNAP test at your veterinarian's office. Due to other tests having a high rate of false positive test results, we only recommend IDEXX brand snap tests. If your DVM has used a different brand, we recommend having the cat retested using this test.

If you live in the central Texas area, you can use this map to find a veterinarian that uses IDEXX tests: [Central Texas IDEXX Vets Map](#)

While APA does not currently use any type of confirmatory tests (See our Webinar "[One and Done For Everyone](#)"), there are some options available:

qPCR - A PCR test detects the presence of proviral DNA, confirming an infection. A qPCR additionally provides numerical quantification of the FeLV proviral DNA (copies/mL). This test can also identify a progressive or regressive infection.

IFA - An IFA test detects the presence of the p27 antigen in leukocytes. An IFA test will only show as positive if the infection has progressed into the bone marrow, where leukocytes originate. Therefore, an IFA can only identify a progressive infection.

Can I bring a FeLV+ cat into my home?

Any new cat should be quarantined from other cats in the household until testing is complete. This protects your existing pets from not only FeLV, but other communicable diseases. If the new cat is confirmed to be FeLV+, we recommend segregating from other FeLV negative adults, unless they have previously been vaccinated against Feline Leukemia. No vaccination is 100% effective, so whether to fully integrate a FeLV+ cat into a home with negative cats is a decision to be made between you and your private veterinarian.

A positive cat can reside in the same household if they have separate living areas. A spare bedroom, office, or bathroom is adequate to prevent transmission. You do not need to be concerned about hand-washing, having dedicated beds, toys, bowls, etc, as FeLV is spread

mainly from queen to kitten, through mating, and through repeated and prolonged exchange of bodily fluids.

Medical Information and Recommendations for Feline Leukemia

Feline Leukemia itself does not require any additional medical care, however, FeLV+ cats are more susceptible to various illnesses including:

- Upper respiratory infections (colored nasal discharge in combination with loss of appetite and/or eye discharge with eye squinting)
- Labored breathing
- Inappetence/anorexia
- Unexplained weight loss and/or lethargy - a usually energetic and outgoing kitty is now withdrawn and/or unwilling to play
- Lymphoma or other cancers
- Anemia

Common Terminal Conditions: FeLV cats can be susceptible to terminal (incurable) disease processes such as cancer/lymphoma, terminal anemia, and fluid production within their belly and/or chest (FIP).

For respiratory illness, which is most common, we prescribe antibiotics. Azithromycin is the first choice for mild respiratory infections and if there is no response we increase to a more potent antibiotic, Baytril.

For more serious illness, we recommend providing palliative care, which typically includes a medication like gabapentin to keep the cat comfortable and/or steroids.

For terminal illness, we recommend a blood test to check for anemia and/or x-rays of the chest to screen for cancer. Once a presumptive diagnosis is determined, supportive-care medications can be prescribed by your DVM based on symptoms.

Your DVM and/or specialists can additionally provide further diagnostics or treatments, if desired.

We recommend waiting until a cat is over 6 months old and has been in the home for over 2 weeks prior to spay or neuter.

FeLV+ cats should receive rabies and FVRCP vaccinations on the same schedule as a FeLV negative cat.

When making end of life decisions, euthanasia should be used only if the cat is presenting with a terminal condition and suffering.

Rehoming a FeLV+ Cat

If you have confirmed the Feline Leukemia diagnosis and are unable to keep the cat yourself, rehoming him yourself or returning him to his community if he was found as a stray would be the next step.

As rehoming may take some time, it's important to first determine where the cat will reside until a home is found.

If this cat was already part of an established outdoor community, s/he should be spayed or neutered and returned to his community. If there is the concern of exposing other cats, exposure among community cats is primarily through mating and queen-to-kitten. The community has already been exposed, and through sterilization, the only potential introduction of the virus is minimal.

If releasing back to a known environment is not an option, you can safely keep the FeLV cat in a bathroom or separate room, without risk of exposing your resident FeLV negative cats, while helping him find his forever home.

Start by asking family members, friends, and others you may know through volunteering or other community activities.

Join and post on as social media groups within your community as possible. There are social media groups specifically for rehoming FeLV+ cats.

Collect as many marketing materials as possible– cute photos, videos, a biography with specific personality details, etc.

Post daily in social media groups looking for another foster or an adopter. Send out funny and unique pleas so that your kitty stands out from others. Stress the urgency of the cat finding an adopter and that an adopter would be a hero for adopting him. Make your adoption pleas clever and captivating, highlighting the cat's personality.

If you're in Texas, you can additionally post to our [PASS Facebook Page](#).

Contact all local shelters and ask if they can take custody of the cat with you as the foster until they are able to find another foster or an adopter. The shelter may be able to advertise him to a broader audience through their website and other resources.

More Adoption Tips

HOW YOU TALK TO POTENTIAL ADOPTERS MATTERS! Instead of saying these cats are sick (they aren't!), note that they have a compromised immune system. Much like a person who is immuno-compromised, they are no different in their day to day lives. However, because they are more susceptible to illness, if they get ill it's important to address it quickly as illness can progress faster in a FeLV+ cat. Explain to adopters that FeLV+ cats have the same quality of life as any other cat, and are equally deserving of a home.

- Educate and disclose to potential adopters all known medical implications of a cat testing positive for FeLV, including (but not limited to) the likely potential for shortened lifespan and the recommended directives for pet care.
- Let potential adopters know what vets in the area specialize in FeLV cat care. Typically cat-specialized hospitals are a good place to start.
- The best placement option for a FeLV+ cat is a home with only other FeLV+ cats or no other cats, until such a time as research directs a change in best practice. Similarly, APA! recommends FeLV+ cats remain indoors only.
- Do not charge an adoption fee for a FeLV cat.
- Counsel adopters on the cat's medical history in detail and go over common signs of illness to watch out for. Remind adopters that FeLV cats need to be seen by a vet at the very first sign of illness as they get sick much faster than cats without FeLV.

TNR and FeLV+ Community Cats

Should we test community cats for FeLV?

Guidelines released by the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) advise against testing community cats for FeLV. Per the AAFP, “Although this document broadly recommends testing all cats for retroviral infection, an exception exists for feral cats in trap-neuter-return (TNR) programs. The prevalence of infection is similar in outdoor pet cats and feral cats; so feral cats do not present an increased threat to pets ([Levy et al 2006b](#)). Additionally, neutering reduces two common modes of transmission: queen to kitten for FeLV and fighting among males for both FeLV and FIV ([Levy 2000](#), [Levy and Crawford 2005](#)). Because population control of feral cats requires commitment to neutering the largest number of cats possible, many TNR programs do not routinely test feral cats ([Wallace and Levy 2006](#)).”

The national average of FeLV infection in community cat colonies is 4.3 percent, which is similar to the percentage of owned cats with FeLV. Areas with a higher TNR presence tend to have a lower occurrence of FeLV+ cats. Additionally, many FeLV tests yield a high rate of false positive test results. Due to the high cost of FeLV / FIV tests, program resources should be re-allocated to treating cats with known illness.

Cats from an established community should be spayed or neutered and returned to their community.

What to do if a healthy community cat tests positive for FeLV?

Spay or neuter the cat and return them to their community. Exposure among community cats is primarily through mating and queen-to-kitten. The community has already been exposed, and through sterilization, the only potential introduction of the virus is minimal.

What to do if a sick community cat tests positive for FeLV?

Provide the cat with appropriate veterinary care, spay or neuter the cat, and return them to their community. For resources or help, reach out to felv@austinpetsalive.org.

For more information, visit:

[2020 AAFP Feline Retrovirus Testing and Management Guidelines](#). Little, S. et al 2020; Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery 22: 5-30

[2020 AAFP Retrovirus Toolkit](#), published by IDEXX

Euthanasia should only be THE LAST RESORT and used only to relieve pain and suffering.

FeLV Myths & Facts

Myth: FeLV is highly contagious and easily spread from cat to cat.

Fact: Transmission of FeLV from cat to cat requires sharing bodily fluids from mating, from queen to kitten, or prolonged and repeated exposure between cats.

Myth: FeLV is a cancer.

Fact: FeLV is a virus. It is not a cancer.

Myth: Cats with FeLV are sick and suffering.

Fact: While the virus weakens the immune system, leaving the cat more susceptible to illness, the virus itself does not cause pain. FeLV+ cats look and act just like any other cat and can live long, happy lives.

Myth: Cats who test positive for FeLV should be euthanized.

Fact: Firstly, there is no one perfect, definitive test for FeLV and tests are often wrong, show only exposure to the virus versus infection, and results can change over time. Cats should never be euthanized based upon a test result. Secondly, FeLV+ cats can live happy lives and are just as deserving of life.

Myth: A cat with FeLV is very expensive to adopt.

Fact: At APA!, adoption fees for FeLV+ cats are waived and we provide all medical care related to the virus for the life of the cat so increased medical costs are never a burden. Even elsewhere though, FeLV+ cats may not present as more expensive because once they have truly reached the end of their life, heroic measures are often not appropriate to pursue.

Myth: My other pets may catch leukemia from the cat, or I may get leukemia from the cat.

Fact: FeLV is only contagious to other cats. No other species can acquire FeLV, including dogs, birds, hamsters, or humans.

APA! FeLV+ Protocols and SOPS

APA! Feline Leukemia Protocols, SOPs, etc available online which you can access here:

<https://americanpetsalive.org/resources>

(Search for: FeLV.)

FeLV webinar which covers our adoption program in a bit more depth:

<https://university.maddiesfund.org/products/feline-leukemia-testing-one-and-done-for-everyone>

[APA! Feline Leukemia Adoption Information - For Adopters](#)

[APA! Feline Leukemia Foster Information - For Fosters](#)

[APA! Feline Leukemia Volunteer Information - For Volunteer](#)