

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) and Feline Leukaemia Virus (FeLV)



CATS PROTECTION
VETERINARY GUIDE 9



FIV and FeLV are both viruses within the same family of retroviruses, but are in different groups within that family. FIV is in one group called lentiviruses – these cause lifelong infections and are generally associated with very slow-progressing disease. FeLV is in a different group called gamma viruses, which have the potential to cause cancerous changes in the cells they infect.

FIV and FeLV are often talked about together as they are both in the retrovirus group and cats can often be tested for both viruses together. However, they behave differently and cause different signs and rates of disease. FIV is thought to infect around four per cent of cats in the UK. FeLV is now thought to infect less than one per cent of cats in the UK – a huge reduction since the uptake of FeLV testing and vaccination strategies.



Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV)

What is FIV?

FIV is a virus in cats that is similar to the human virus, HIV or Human Immunodeficiency Virus. However, FIV does not infect humans, and HIV does not infect cats.

How do cats catch FIV?

The virus is present in the blood, saliva and other body fluids of infected cats. It is very delicate and is unable to survive for long periods outside of the cat – so it cannot be transferred to other cats from your hands or clothes. Cats primarily pick up the virus through fighting – via bite wounds – or through mating behaviour, but it can also be passed from an infected female cat to her kittens.

Do all cats that get the virus become permanently infected?

Yes. A cat will produce antibodies, but these are ineffective and once a cat has FIV, they will be FIV positive for the rest of their life.

What are the signs of FIV?

There is an incubation period of months or even years when your cat may be perfectly healthy before signs of infection show. Many infected cats have years of normal life and may die from something else entirely before their FIV infection causes any problems.

Signs of FIV are varied but usually result from a weakened immune system and therefore a vulnerability to other infections. Once disease develops, infected cats may:

- become repeatedly ill eg with cat flu, sore gums, skin disease or digestive upsets
- simply seem 'off-colour' or have a high temperature
- take a long time to recover from infections
- lose weight
- develop tumours

How do I have my cat tested for FIV?

Vets can quickly perform a test that detects the antibodies to the virus in blood. It is recommended that positive results – particularly those from otherwise healthy cats – are sent for confirmation using a different test at an external laboratory, as false positive results can occur.

Kittens less than five to six months old may have had antibodies passed on to them by their infected mothers, but not the virus itself. On average, only a third of kittens born to FIV-positive mothers actually have FIV themselves. A special test to detect the virus should be performed on such kittens and antibody tests can be repeated when the kittens are five to six months old.

Results can give a false negative if a cat has only recently been exposed to the virus.

Is there any treatment for FIV?

There is currently no reliable treatment for FIV and it is not possible to predict if and when signs may develop. Vets will treat each FIV-positive cat individually, depending on the signs they develop, but treatment may involve:

- antibiotics and/or anti-inflammatory drugs as appropriate for secondary recurrent infections
- drugs that may help through direct anti-viral activity
- keeping infected cats indoors, with a good diet and ensuring they are fully vaccinated and regularly treated against fleas and worms. This will help to protect them from secondary infections, as well as help to prevent the spread of FIV to other cats. See Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Indoor and out door cats*

Cats Protection recommends that FIV-positive cats are kept indoors and only allowed outside in an impenetrable garden or safe run. They should not be allowed direct contact with FIV-negative cats.

Will I be able to put my FIV-positive cat in a boarding cattery?

Most catteries will accept FIV-positive cats if they are not showing other signs of infectious disease – aggressive, close contact is required for the virus to be transmitted. The virus is delicate and easily killed by disinfectants, therefore simple precautions and routine cleaning procedures will prevent transmission of the virus in the normal boarding environment, where cats are housed separately.

However, the immune systems of FIV-positive cats may be poor and infections caught while in a cattery could be more serious for them than for a FIV-negative one. If accommodation is available well away from other cats it may reduce the risk of your cat catching a secondary infection.

Can I protect my cat against FIV?

Unfortunately, there is currently no vaccine for FIV in the UK although, you can reduce their chances of contracting FIV through fighting by having them neutered.

My cat died from FIV – can I get another cat?

The virus does not survive long in the environment so it is safe to bring a new cat into the house shortly after losing a FIV-positive cat. It is advisable to disinfect the food bowls and litter trays before using them again. If you already have other cats, it is advisable to wait and test them before introducing another cat – speak to your vet for advice.

Feline Leukaemia Virus (FeLV)

What is FeLV?

FeLV is a virus that causes a fatal disease in cats by affecting the immune system and can cause vulnerability to other infections, anaemia or tumours. It does not infect humans.

How do cats catch FeLV?

The virus is usually transmitted through direct contact with the saliva of infected cats, commonly through grooming or sharing food and water bowls or through mating behaviour. It can also be transmitted from an infected mother to her kittens while they are in the womb or through her milk.

Do all cats that get the virus become permanently infected?

No, after testing positive for the virus, some cats are able to clear the infection and recover after a few weeks – these cats are likely to have a degree of immunity to future infection.

The younger or weaker a cat is at the time of infection and the more contact they have with the virus, the more likely they are to remain permanently infected. Although natural resistance to the virus may gradually improve as a cat ages, older cats can still become permanently infected.

What are the signs of FeLV?

There is an incubation period of months or sometimes years before signs of infection show in those cats that are permanently infected. Sadly, around 80 per cent of cats diagnosed with FeLV die within three and a half years.

Many different signs can be seen, including:

- recurrent infection eg with respiratory infections, sore gums or digestive problems
- being 'off-colour' or having a high temperature
- enlarged lymph nodes which will often be cancerous eg internally or around the throat, armpit, groin or knee regions
- severe anaemia
- taking a long time to recover from infections
- development of cancers
- breeding problems

How do I have my cat tested for FeLV?

Vets can quickly perform a test to detect the virus in blood. It is recommended that positive results – particularly those from otherwise healthy cats – are sent for confirmation at an external laboratory, as false positive results can occur. As some cats are able to clear the infection after a few weeks, it may also be prudent to retest some weeks after a first positive test result.

Results can be inaccurate if the cat has only recently been exposed to the virus. It is recommended that you wait before re-testing negative cats if they are known to have had direct contact with other FeLV-positive cats. FeLV-negative cats should be kept separate from FeLV-positive cats during this period.

Is there any treatment for FeLV?

Unfortunately, there is currently no reliable treatment for FeLV so vets will treat each FeLV-positive cat individually, depending on the signs they develop. Sadly the outlook is likely to be poor.

Keeping infected cats indoors and ensuring they are fully vaccinated will help to protect them from other infections, as well as helping to prevent the spread of FeLV to other cats. Any secondary recurrent infections may be treated with antibiotics and/or anti-inflammatory drugs as necessary.

Many affected cats have to be euthanased because they have a poor quality of life. It is Cats Protection's policy not to rehome cats known to be infected with FeLV.

Cats Protection recommends that owners keep FeLV-positive cats indoors and only allow them outside in an impenetrable garden or safe run. They should not be allowed contact with any FeLV-negative cats, to avoid spread of this disease which is fatal in persistently infected cats.

Can I protect my cat against FeLV?

A vaccine is available to protect uninfected cats against FeLV but if a cat is already infected it has no benefit. Protection cannot be guaranteed and therefore it is recommended that FeLV-positive cats are not mixed with FeLV-negative cats – vaccinated or not.

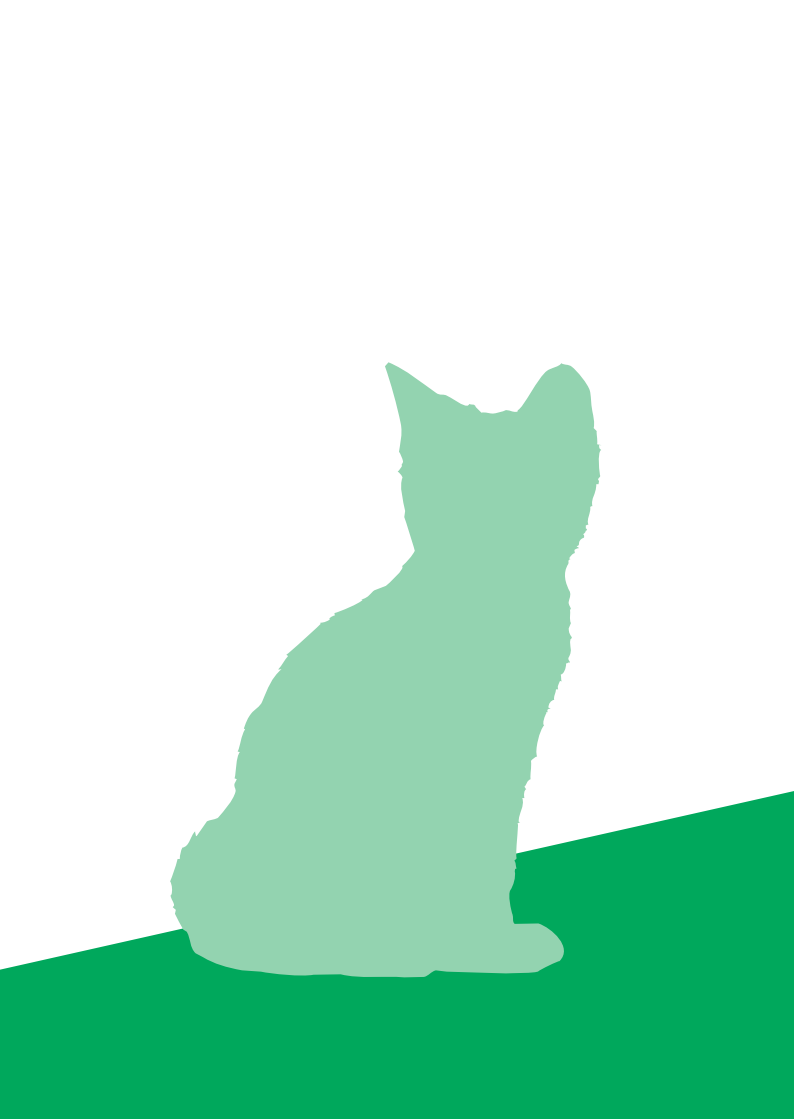
The amount of FeLV in the cat population has reduced significantly since the introduction of vaccines and testing strategies but it is vitally important that you take your cat for annual boosters to maintain their protection and help control FeLV in your area.

My cat died from FeLV – can I get another cat?

The virus does not survive long in the environment so it is safe to bring a new cat into the house 24 hours after losing a FeLV-positive cat. It is advisable to disinfect the food bowls and litter trays before using them again. However, if you already have other cats, it is advisable to wait to test them for the virus before introducing another cat. Speak to your vet for advice.

Learn more about your cat online!

Take a look at our free interactive tool to help you understand cats' origins and their behaviour within our homes. <http://learnonline.cats.org.uk/content/ufo>



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For more information about Cats Protection or to make a donation, please visit www.cats.org.uk or phone our Helpline on 03000 12 12 12.

Reg Charity 203644 (England and Wales) and SC037711 (Scotland)

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