

Feline Retroviral Diseases: Feline Leukemia and Feline Aids

**Feline Leukemia Virus (also known as FeLV) and Feline Aids (also known as Feline Immunodeficiency Virus or FIV) are amongst the most common infectious diseases of cats.** They are fairly easily spread from cat to cat via saliva (grooming or biting), nasal secretions, urine, feces, and milk. Kittens may be affected at birth from their mothers. Both viruses are in the family of Retroviruses, and both diseases can lead to grave sickness and mortality in cats of any age. A simple in-house blood test, commonly called the 3DX, is available at most veterinary hospitals to screen for the presence of the viruses. Currently there is an effective vaccine to prevent FeLV, but unfortunately not so for FIV. Any cat that has access to the outdoors should be vaccinated for FeLV. It is also recommended that cats in multi-cat households be vaccinated.

**What cats should be tested for these viruses?** *ALL CATS should be tested as kittens or when first acquired!* Before you introduce a new cat into your home, you should make sure you know whether or not they carry these viruses. *Also, all cats should be tested in an event that they may have been exposed to the virus-* for example, if your cat comes home with a bite wound or abscess. If one cat in a multi-cat household tests positive, then all house mates should also be tested. Depending on their lifestyle, cats may need to be retested throughout their lifetime. Sometimes more than one test is recommended a number of weeks apart. There are advanced testing methods that can be requested from referral laboratories.

**What cats are at greatest risk?** Kittens are most susceptible to acquiring the viruses. Un-neutered outdoor male cats are most likely to carry and spread the viruses. However, any cat that has access to outdoors is at greater risk, especially a cat that gets into fights with other cats. Indoor-only cats can even be at risk if they have close contact with an infected cat, via mutual grooming, sharing of litter boxes and food dishes.

**What are the signs of disease?** *Sometimes nothing at first!* A cat may mask the virus(es) for quite some time. FeLV is the number one cause of cancer in cats, even very young ones, and may also cause blood disorders and severe immune system compromise. Once the cat starts to manifest clinical signs, you may see any of the following: Loss of appetite, weight loss, poor hair coat, large lymph nodes, persistent fever, pale gums, gingivitis (inflammation of gums), infection of skin or urinary bladder or upper respiratory tract, diarrhea, seizures and other neurological disorders, eye disease, and abortion. As you can see from the list, the viruses may cause disease in any shape or form, and all sick cats should be screened for the viruses.

For more information, see the following websites:

<http://www.catvets.com/professionals/guidelines/publications>

<http://www.vet.cornell.edu/fhc>

<http://www.veterinarypartner.com>

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