



Feline Leukemia Virus

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Feline Leukemia Virus, or FeLV, is a retrovirus that causes the immune system to break down, making cats more susceptible to other diseases. Feline Leukemia Virus is the leading cause of illness and death of cats today.

FeLV is most commonly transmitted by mutual grooming, biting and fighting. Prolonged cat-to-cat contact is necessary for effective transmission, as the virus is fairly unstable and will not survive long in the environment. Detergents, bleach, heat and drying will inactivate or kill FeLV. Not all cats exposed to the virus will contract the disease.

Developing Infection

Upon entering body, the virus reproduces in the lymph tissue, which serves as the cat's first line of defense against disease.

About 30 percent of cats exposed to FeLV will become permanently infected. Infection may be detected within 2 weeks to 5 weeks after exposure. An infected cat will be ill for a few days, recover and appear to be back to normal for

weeks, months or years. Vaccination will not help.

Other cats have an immune response and do not become "persistently viremic," which means the cat does not carry the virus in the blood or bone marrow indefinitely. They may only develop a mild form of feline leukemia lasting three days to 10 days. Adult cats are more likely than kittens to develop an immunity to the disease.

The FeLV virus may stay latent in the bone marrow for several years or confined in the body for variable periods of time, during which the cat appears to be healthy. The disease can erupt after the cat has been stressed or medicated with a drug that suppresses the immune system.

Diagnosis

The ELISA and IFA are two commonly used tests available for the diagnosis of FeLV. The ELISA, or enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay, is performed by the veterinarian and shows a color change if the cat is positive for the virus. False-positive test results do occur occasionally, so retesting is recommended. The IFA test, or immunofluorescence assay, requires a blood sample be tested at a

TRANSMISSION

- saliva-sneezing, hissing
- mucus membranes, tears
- mutual grooming
- biting, fighting
- sharing food, water bowls
- urine
- feces, sharing litter boxes
- blood
- milk of nursing queen
- intrauterine transmission to unborn kittens

diagnostic laboratory. The IFA test is also called the Hardy or slide test.

In the early stages of infection, some test results will be negative. The ELISA test will test positive for the FeLV virus before the IFA test.

Treatment

Currently, no cure exists for FeLV. However, various antiviral compounds to treat feline leukemia are in the experimental stages. If a cat is sick the illness can be treated, but treatment will not eliminate the virus. Many cats live for several years after diagnosis.

Prevention

Several vaccines are available for FeLV, but USDA doesn't have standard requirements for these drugs. Vaccine effectiveness is estimated between 75 percent and 85 percent. No vaccine is 100 percent effective. Therefore, after vaccinating a cat, avoiding unnecessary exposure is the best means of prevention.

FELV SYMPTOMS

- gingivitis, oral ulcers
- abscesses, non-healing wounds
- persistent infections
- chronic illness
- anemia
- jaundice
- weight loss, decreased appetite
- depression
- diarrhea/constipation
- blood in stool
- enlarged lymph nodes
- difficulty breathing
- progressive weakness
- excessive drinking, urination
- abortion
- infertility
- birth of "fading kittens"

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