

What is FeLV?

Facts about the Feline Leukemia virus

by Pat Brayer Clinic Director

What exactly is Feline Leukemia Virus, or FeLV, as it is also known?

FeLV is a contagious retrovirus which can cause a severe decline in health, sometimes at a very young age, in kittens and cats. FeLV positive cats remain infected for their lifetime, but the virus may not always progress to an 'active' stage. FeLV can prevent a cat from overcoming other infections that healthy cats can generally overcome, and often, multiple severe health issues may necessitate euthanasia to prevent suffering. FeLV may progress rapidly in unhealthy cats, or take years to progress. FeLV can also remain dormant in a cat's body during its entire lifetime. For years, FeLV positive kittens and cats were euthanized, even if they did not exhibit signs of declining health, and in many shelters across the country, they still are. Here at HSSA, we've taken a progressive stance and want to give these special kittens and cats a chance to find a loving home – FeLV isn't an automatic death sentence anymore.

If you've adopted a kitten or cat from HSSA, or volunteer with our HSSA cats, you will see the 'test results' from the FeLV test that we administer to all our kittens and cats either upon intake or prior to adoption, depending on age. HSSA tests each kitten and cat so that we can provide as much information as possible about the health of our felines, particularly that of such a highly contagious virus.

The national average for FeLV in kittens and cats is 2-3%.

The average for FeLV positive kittens and cats that are admitted to HSSA exceeds 15%. The majority are kittens, born to unsplayed cats who are allowed to 'free roam'. The majority of these cats are pets, or were pets and abandoned, as their kittens are generally social, not feral. Because FeLV is so highly contagious, outdoor cats, and cats that are allowed to go outdoors, are most at-risk.

How is it spread?

The FeLV virus is in the saliva, nasal secretions, urine and feces of an infected cat. It can be passed through sexual contact, fighting and casual contact—grooming, food bowls, litter boxes. It is also in the milk of an infected mother cat, who then passes it to her kittens.

Are you wondering if you can or should adopt an FeLV positive cat?

Yes! You can't help who you fall in love with (and FeLV cats tend to be really sweet and affectionate and make great companions, and they don't know they have FeLV!), and an otherwise healthy cat with FeLV can live a relatively healthy life if kept strictly indoors in a stable, stress-free environment with proper nutrition and

regular yearly health check-ups. And yes, you can foster or adopt an FeLV cat if you have other cats at home. If your current cats are negative for FeLV (a simple 'snap test' can

tell), then we highly recommend vaccinating your 'negative' cat according to FeLV vaccination protocol to protect them. The vaccination is 96-97% effective. Yearly boosters are all that's required. Of course, you can always adopt or foster multiple FeLV positive cats as they can live with other FeLV positive cats. Keeping pet cats safely indoors, spaying and neutering, and of course, Trap/Neuter/Return, will increase our chances of lowering the incidence of FeLV in our Feline population, and hopefully one day, FeLV will be a thing of the past. 🐾

Meowtropolis is a room where some of the long-term FeLV residents are able to roam free. It has lots of climbing and hiding spots, and an outdoor patio for lounging!



Layla, Jacob and Kelvin enjoy a bunting session on the Meowtropolis patio.

