

March 2023

## Viral Diseases in Cats

*There are several viral diseases that cats can carry and transmit to other cats. Below, we will learn more about Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) and Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV).*

### FIV

FIV is an immunodeficiency virus, similar to HIV in people. FIV, also known as the “angry cat disease,” is spread via blood transmission from an infected cat, such as through a bite wound. More rarely, a pregnant female can spread FIV to her kittens while in the womb. Once a cat is infected with FIV, there are three stages that the infection may take:

**Acute phase:** The first phase is the “acute” phase, which is within a few months after infection. The virus replicates in the lymph nodes and can cause fever, lethargy, and lymph node enlargement. The symptoms are often mild, and are often missed or overlooked.

**Asymptomatic phase:** The second phase is the asymptomatic phase, where the virus slowly replicates without any outward signs of illness. This stage can last for months to years. Some cats may never leave this stage of infection!

**Progressive phase:** The final phase is the progressive phase. At this point, the virus can affect the cat’s immune system, making them more likely to develop secondary infections, such as upper respiratory infections, abscesses, eye infections, dental disease, and even certain cancers.

The best way to keep your cat from getting FIV is through prevention! Because cat bites are the easiest way to transmit the disease, keeping cats inside and away from other cats is the best way to reduce the chances of your cat contracting FIV. There is currently no cure for FIV. If a cat is sick and has FIV, the cat is often treated symptomatically, as it is the secondary illness that is causing the illness, not the FIV itself. There is currently no vaccine produced in the US against FIV.

### FELV

FeLV is also an immunodeficiency virus. Known as the “friendly cat disease,” it is spread through many means, including nasal secretions (touching noses, sharing food and water dishes, etc.), urine, feces, milk, and blood. A pregnant female can also spread the virus to her kittens while in the womb. This virus is slowly progressive, with most cats becoming clinical as time goes on. Like FIV, it makes cats much more susceptible to secondary infections. However, FeLV is the leading cause of cancer in cats, including cancers such as lymphoma and leukemia. The median survival time for cats with FeLV after being diagnosed is around 2.5 years.

Like with FIV, the best way to keep your cat from becoming infected is through prevention! There is a preventative FeLV vaccine available in the US, although it is not 100% effective against the virus. Furthermore, the vaccine does not benefit cats that already have FeLV. Just like with FIV, if your cat is sick and has FeLV, the secondary illnesses are often treated, as the FeLV cannot be treated itself.



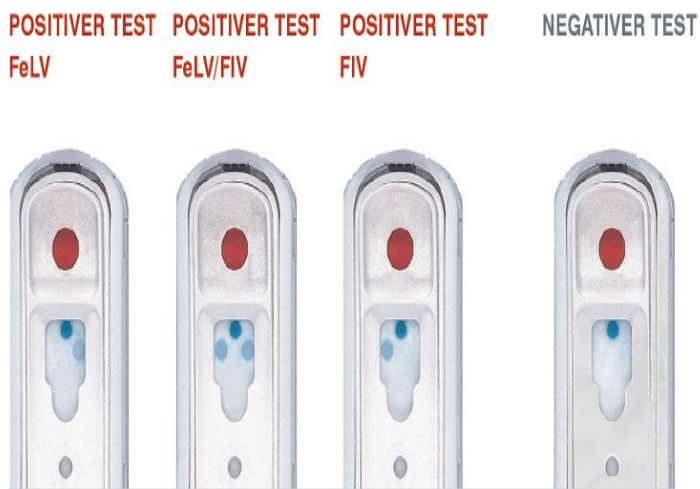
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## Diagnosis

How are pets diagnosed with FIV/FelV? The most common method of testing is with an ELISA test, which takes into account at the number of antibodies to the viruses in the cat's bloodstream. However, the test can sometimes show up negative, depending on the stage of illness each cat is displaying. For this reason, it is currently recommended that cats are tested yearly, as well as if they ever become sick. Very rarely, false positives can be seen. If this is the case (especially in an otherwise healthy cat), a secondary PCR test can be performed to verify whether your cat truly has the virus or not



Best regards

Rachel Rielinger, DVM



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