

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukaemia virus (FeLV)

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FIV and FeLV are both infectious diseases that affect your cat's immune system. This guide gives advice about the symptoms and management of both diseases.

Because they are both in the retrovirus group FIV and FeLV are often talked about together and cats can often be tested for both viruses together. However each virus behaves differently and causes different signs and rates of disease. FIV is thought to infect around 4% of cats in the UK. FeLV is now thought to infect less than 1% of cats in the UK. There has been a huge reduction since the uptake of FeLV testing and vaccination options.

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV)

What is FIV?

FIV is a virus in cats that is similar to the human virus called human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). 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 which means it cannot be transferred to other cats from your hands or clothes. Cats primarily pick up the virus through fighting, as it spreads via bite wounds. It can also be transmitted during mating behaviour or passed from an infected mother cat to her kittens.

Permanent infection

A cat may produce antibodies after being infected with FIV, but these antibodies are ineffective in clearing the virus. Once a cat contracts FIV, they will remain 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 for example with cat flu, sore gums, skin disease or digestive upsets
- take a long time to recover from infections
- develop tumours

Testing for FIV

Vets can quickly perform a test that detects the antibodies to the virus in blood. For healthy cats, a positive test result should be confirmed using a further test at an external laboratory, as false positives are possible.

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 or antibody tests can be repeated when the kittens are over six months old.

Results should therefore be confirmed with a test for the virus at an external laboratory or antibody tests can be repeated when the kittens are over six months old.

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.

General advice is to:

- keep infected cats indoors
- neuter them
- ensure they are vaccinated
- feed a good quality, complete cat food and avoid raw food

This will help to protect them from secondary infections, as well as help to prevent the spread of FIV to other cats. For more information see

[**cats.org.uk/indoor-cats**](https://cats.org.uk/indoor-cats)

Cats Protection recommends that FIV-positive cats are kept indoors and only allowed outside in a secure, impenetrable garden. They should not be allowed direct contact with FIV-negative cats.

Boarding catteries and FIV cats

Most catteries will accept FIV-positive cats if they are not showing other signs of infectious disease. 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. Close contact is required for the virus to be transmitted, and catteries should house cats 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 cat. If the cattery has accommodation well away from other cats, this can lower the risk of secondary infections. Alternatively, keeping your cat at home with a trusted cat sitter can be a safer and less stressful option.

Protection against FIV

There is currently no vaccine for FIV in the UK. However, you can lower your cat's risk 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 an FIV-positive cat. It is a good idea to disinfect the food bowls and litter trays before using them again. If you already have other cats, it is advisable to wait and get them tested for FIV before introducing another cat. Your vet can advise further.

Feline leukaemia virus (FeLV)

What is FeLV?

FeLV is a virus that causes a fatal disease in cats by affecting the immune system, making them more vulnerable to other infections, anaemia or tumours. It does not infect humans.

How do cats catch FeLV?

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

Following infection

After becoming infected with FeLV, some cats are able to clear the infection and recover after a few weeks. These cats often develop some immunity, making them less likely to be infected again. However, younger or weaker cats, as well as those with more exposure to the virus, are more likely to remain 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% of cats diagnosed with FeLV die within three to four years.

Many different signs can be seen, including:

- recurrent infection, for example with respiratory infections, sore gums or digestive problems
- seeming quieter than normal, off their food or having a high temperature
- enlarged lymph nodes which will often be cancerous, for example 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

FeLV testing

Vets can quickly perform a test to detect the virus in blood. It's recommended that positive results, especially 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 a good idea 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 retesting 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.

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 long-term outlook is likely to be poor.

Keeping infected cats indoors and ensuring they are fully vaccinated will help to protect them from other infections and 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 policy to not rehome cats known to be infected with FeLV.

Cats Protection recommends that FeLV-positive cats are kept indoors and only allowed outside in a secure, impenetrable garden. They should not be allowed direct contact with FeLV-negative cats to avoid spread of this disease which is fatal in persistently infected cats.

Protecting against FeLV

There is a vaccination available to protect cats against FeLV. Kittens and unvaccinated cats require an initial course of two injections three to four weeks apart and then boosters depending on their risk and lifestyle. The vaccination is not effective in cats that are already infected with FeLV, and protection cannot be guaranteed, so FeLV-positive cats should not mix with FeLV-negative cats. Since the introduction of vaccines and testing strategies, the number of FeLV cases in the cat population has significantly decreased. Cats whose infection or previous vaccination history is unknown can be tested before starting vaccinations.

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 soon after losing an FeLV-positive cat. It is a good idea to disinfect the food bowls and litter trays before using them again. If you already have other cats, it is advisable to wait and get them tested for the virus before introducing another cat. Speak to your vet for further advice.

Looking for cat advice?

The following vet-approved guides are available to download from **cats.org.uk/information-leaflets**

Essential guides

Behaviour: Understanding your cat's behaviour W84009

Behaviour: Managing your cat's behaviour W84010

Bringing your cat home W84002

Caring for your cat W84001

Caring for your kitten W84015

Cats and people W84014

Cats living together W84011

Elderly cats W84016

End-of-life, grief and loss W84007

Feeding and obesity W84004

Feral cats W84017

Indoor and outdoor cats W84012

Keeping your cat safe W84005

Microchipping W84008

Moving home W84003

Neutering W84006

Pregnant cats, birth and care of young kittens W84018

Veterinary guides

Arthritis W83201

Cat flu W83216

Digestive disorders: vomiting and diarrhoea W83218

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukaemia virus (FeLV) W83209

Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD) W83202

Fleas and other parasites W83215

Heart murmurs and heart disease W83211

Hyperthyroidism W83212

Infectious disease and vaccination W83217

Kidney or renal disease W83206

Skin disorders W83204

Teeth and oral health W83214

Please see cats.org.uk for more information on:

Cats and pregnant women: toxoplasmosis

Cats and the law

Cats with disabilities

Diabetes

Feline asthma

Feline coronavirus (FCoV) and feline infectious peritonitis (FIP)

Feline parvovirus (FPV)

Hypertension

You and your vet

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