



# Feline Leukemia Virus

St. Michael Veterinary Clinic

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## **General Information:**

Feline Leukemia (FeLV) virus is one of the most common and destructive of all cat viruses. The disease is highly contagious and is spread primarily by saliva during catfights, grooming or mating.

Not all cats exposed to (FeLV) become infected. About 40% of exposed cats have immune systems that destroy the invading virus. The remainder of exposed cats become persistently infected (30%) or develop a latent infection (30%). The latter group has inactive virus in their bone marrow, and these virus particles may later become active when the cat becomes ill from another disease, stress, or certain drugs.

## **Transmission:**

Feline Leukemia virus is transmitted only from cat to cat, with NO evidence of spreading to humans. Blood, urine, and other bodily fluids can spread the virus. Kittens may become infected while still in the womb, when the mother bites off the umbilical cord or during nursing.

## **Detection:**

A blood test can be used to detect FeLV infection. A positive test means the cat has FeLV in its blood and probably in its saliva and is infectious to other cats. Of the cats persistently infected, about 25% will die within 1 year and 75% will die within 3 years. Some may live a normal life but tend to have various chronic illnesses.

## **Illness:**

There are no signs specific for FeLV infection. FeLV can cause cancerous tumors to grow in any organ of your cat's body. The virus affects bone marrow and severely depresses immune system functions so a cat's body can't fight off disease. Disorders commonly associated with FeLV infection include: Chronic respiratory disease; chronic infection of the mouth, gums and tongue, chronic eye disease, frequent or chronic skin disease, reproductive disease (abortion, still births and kitten deaths), frequent or chronic urinary tract infections, chronic digestive tract disease, and other systemic diseases (infectious peritonitis, hemobartonellosis, toxoplasmosis, polyarthritis).

## **Important Facts**

- ✓ Indoor cats are at low risk for developing FeLV infection.
- ✓ Outdoor cats are at high risk for developing FeLV infection.
- ✓ Currently, there is no uniformly effective treatment for cats infected with FeLV.

**Prevention:** Vaccination before exposure to the virus is the best means of preventing FeLV infection. Annual boosters are necessary to maintain protection. Without vaccination, isolation from other cats is the only means of prevention.