

Feline Leukemia FAQ

FelV, or Feline Leukemia Virus, is a virus that affects the immune system of a cat. It isn't a form of cancer, but is a virus that may weaken the immune system and may make opportunistic infections and certain types of cancer more likely. Cats with FelV can live normal, happy lives—they may just have a shorter life expectancy than FelV negative cats. Historically, cats with this disease have been euthanized the minute they are diagnosed. Austin Pets Alive! has taken a different stance, allowing FelV cats to live with dignity and be adopted into loving homes—however, we can only continue to save these cats if people are willing to foster and adopt them.

Is FelV Contagious?

Only to other cats. For this reason, it is required that FelV+ cats are kept indoors only. They can only cohabitate with other FelV+ cats as it is spread from cat to cat via prolonged, direct contact with an infected cat's saliva (sharing food bowls, grooming each other, etc.), urine, blood, and from queen to kittens during pregnancy. Feline leukemia is species specific, so other animals such as dogs cannot contract the virus. The virus itself is not airborne and dies rapidly in the environment, so you won't have to worry about carrying the virus on clothes when you leave the house or have friends over.

Are the FelV+ cats available for adoption sickly?

No. The FelV+ cats appear and act just as healthy as the other cats we have available for adoption. They do, however, have an increased risk of getting sick. This makes protecting them from stress, feeding a high quality diet, and addressing health problems as soon as they arise critical. You wouldn't know a cat had FelV by just looking at it, and many people have FelV+ cats in their home and don't even know it because they never got them tested.

How long do FelV+ cats live?

It can be hard to say! There are stages of FelV which may impact lifespan, and a cat's viral load may change over time. From available research, progressively infected FelV+ cats often live between 2-6 years after diagnosis if they were diagnosed as adults, and 6 months-2 years after diagnosis if they were diagnosed as kittens. Regressively infected cats are showing normal lifespans in research studies. However, it is possible for FelV+ cats to live both shorter and longer lives than the ranges we've listed here; every cat is unique. The most important thing to remember is that no matter how much time they have, it will be better because they're with you in a loving home.

Do FelV+ cats need special medication or care?

Not while they are healthy. If/when they do eventually get sick, they will often get very sick quickly and may need more care than a normal cat since their immune system may be hampered. This is why APA! offers complimentary care of illnesses that may arise due to a cat's feline leukemia status.

Why do shelters usually automatically euthanize FeLV+ cats?

There are many myths out there about feline leukemia. As a result, it can be challenging to find people willing to adopt or foster FeLV+ cats. Some organizations feel this is more than they can handle or that they do not have the resources to shelter these cats.

I'm still not sure. Can you give me more information?

Yes!! We would be more than happy to talk to you about the FeLV+ cats in our program and about the virus. If you would like more information please email felv@austinpetsalive.org and let us know you are interested in more information on FeLV+ cats.