

Quality Care Animal Hospital
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Feline Leukemia and Feline Immunodeficiency Virus

Feline Leukemia (FeLV) is caused by a retrovirus. As the name implies, the virus can be contracted weeks, months, or even years before the cat becomes ill. Because of this characteristic of the disease it is very important that all cats be tested for the virus at least once in their lifetime. This includes new cats and kittens introduced into a household. Even if a cat is going to be strictly indoors it is important that the cat be tested for the virus. This becomes an especially necessary consideration if the cat is going to be introduced to a household that already contains established cats. If the established cats have tested negative for the virus then it is very prudent that the new arrival be tested **BEFORE** exposing the established cats. Testing involves a simple blood test to detect the virus.

The feline leukemia virus is transmitted through contact with cats that are harboring the virus already. This virus is found mostly in saliva and to a lesser extent in urine. It can be transmitted via prolonged face to face contact during grooming, fighting, or sharing food and water bowls.

Feline leukemia is a deadly disease. There is no good treatment. Symptoms of the disease include a suppressed immune system that leads to chronic debilitating infections and anemia. The virus also has the ability to cause cancerous tumors in the chest and abdomen. Cats that are not ill with the disease may begin manifesting the disease if exposed to a stressful situation such as surgery or another unrelated illness. About 80% of cats that test positive for the virus and are ill will die within three years.

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) is different from the feline leukemia virus but has many similarities. FIV is actually very similar to the HIV virus that causes AIDS in humans. There is no evidence that the virus can infect humans. FIV is contagious to other cats and is contracted mostly through bite wounds and, like the leukemia virus, can be harbored for months or years before it ever causes illness. Signs of the disease include lack of appetite, weight loss, persistent gum and dental disease, anemia, cancer, and other chronic disease conditions.

Testing for FIV is similar to testing for FeLV and at this hospital the tests are always ran together for cats over 6 months of age. It is not unusual for a cat harboring one virus to also harbor the other.