

Feline Leukemia FAQ

FeLV, or Feline Leukemia Virus, is a virus that attacks the immune system of a cat. It isn't a form of cancer, but is actually a virus that weakens the immune system. Cats with FeLV can live normal, happy lives—they 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 mother cat 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 absolutely 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.

Do FeLV+ cats need special medication or care?

Not while they are healthy. If/when they do eventually get sick they will usually get very sick quickly and may need more care than a normal cat since their immune system doesn't work as well. This is why APA! offers to take care of any illnesses that may arise due to a cat's feline leukemia status free of charge.

Why do shelters usually automatically kill FeLV+ cats?

There are many myths out there about feline leukemia. As a result, it is 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 felvstudy@austinpetsalive.org and let them know you are interested in more information on FeLV+ cats.