

Feline Leukemia Virus: a threat to kittens everywhere

Guelph, ON

Feline leukemia virus (FeLV) is one of the most common causes of infectious diseases in cats worldwide. Cats infected with FeLV have an increased risk of developing cancer, oral disease, bone marrow suppression, anemia, neurologic disease and secondary infections due to immunosuppression.

FeLV transmission can occur between cats that are in close contact with each other; it spreads through saliva and other bodily fluids. The virus may also be transmitted from mother to kittens during pregnancy or nursing. Kittens are at the highest risk of infection and development of FeLV-related diseases.

Having your cat(s) tested for FeLV infection is highly recommended when they are first adopted, prior to initial vaccination against FeLV, following exposure to infected cats, or if clinical signs of illness are observed. Your veterinary team will advise you on the testing options available for your cat.

Prevention of infection is key because there is no cure for FeLV infection. Some of the risk factors that have been associated with FeLV infection include: sexually intact males, contact with FeLV-infected cats, free-roaming outdoor access, kittens from infected mothers, and oral disease. Therefore, ensuring your cats are neutered, restricting their outdoor access to reduce encounters with infected cats, and having annual physical examinations done by your veterinarian will help reduce your cat's risk.

For more information:

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Vaccination against FeLV is a preventive measure that your veterinarian will also discuss with you once they have screened your cat for FeLV. It is recommended that all kittens under one year of age are vaccinated with a two-dose primary series starting as early as 8 weeks of age, followed by a second dose administered 3–4 weeks later. A single FeLV booster vaccine is then administered one year later, and annually thereafter in at-risk cats.

The recommendation is to vaccinate all kittens because a kitten's lifestyle and risk of exposure to FeLV frequently changes after adoption. In addition, kittens are more susceptible to infection, FeLV-associated disease and death if exposed to FeLV compared with adult cats. Once cats reach adulthood there is still some risk of acquiring a FeLV infection but it decreases as cats age. For cats that are two years of age and older, your veterinary team will conduct an annual risk assessment with you to determine if your cat is at risk of FeLV and in need of annual vaccination.