

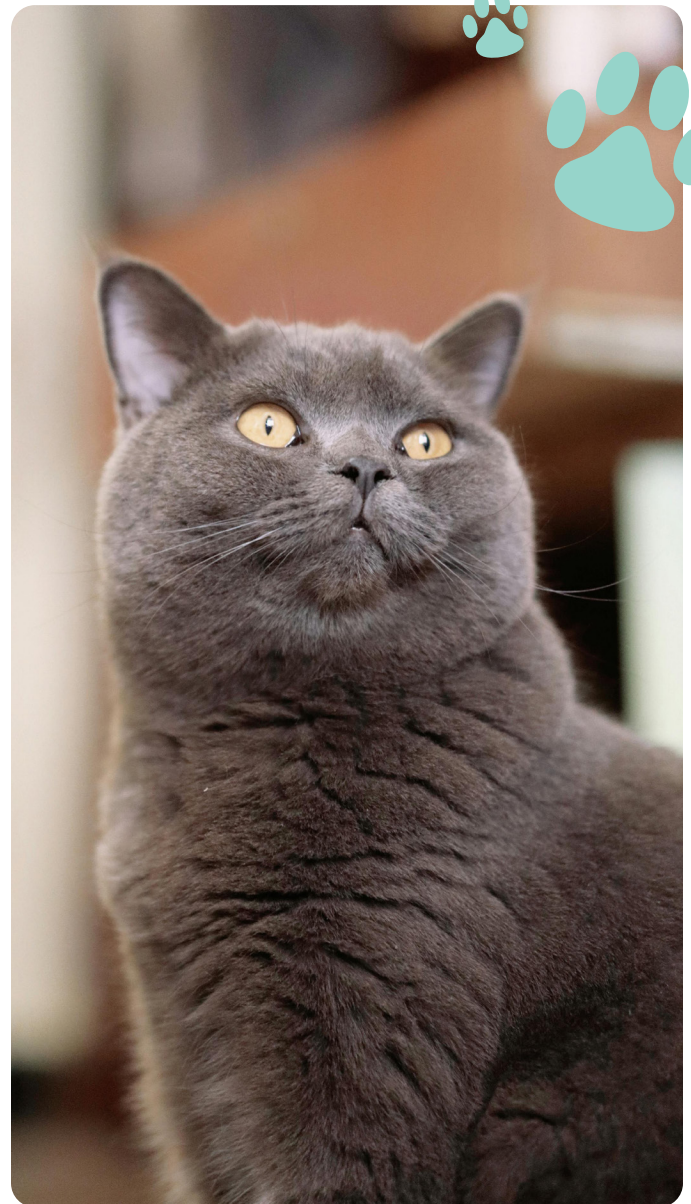


## THE BASICS: FELINE LEUKEMIA VIRUS (FELV)

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Feline leukemia virus (FeLV) is one of the **most common and serious infectious diseases in cats**. The virus attacks a cat's immune system and blood cells, leaving them vulnerable to a wide range of infections, cancers, and other complications. FeLV is ultimately fatal, though many infected cats can live for several years with proper care.

- FeLV is primarily spread through saliva during close, prolonged contact between cats, including mutual grooming, sharing food and water bowls, sharing litter boxes, and bite wounds.
- An infected mother cat can also pass the virus to her kittens during pregnancy or through nursing.
- FeLV affects about 2-3% of all cats in the United States and Canada, with higher infection rates among ill, outdoor, or otherwise high-risk cats.
- Kittens are especially vulnerable to FeLV because their immune systems are still developing. Adult cats are naturally more resistant, though they can still become infected.
- There is no cure for FeLV, which is why prevention through vaccination and testing is so important.
- FeLV is not transmissible to people or dogs.



## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Visit the Cornell Feline Health Center at [vet.cornell.edu](http://vet.cornell.edu) and search "Feline Leukemia Virus"

## SYMPTOMS OF FELV

Many cats with FeLV show no signs of infection at first. Over time, as the virus weakens the immune system, symptoms may develop and can include:

- **Loss of appetite and weight loss**
- **Pale gums or other signs of anemia**
- **Poor coat condition**
- **Recurring infections (skin, respiratory, urinary, etc.)**
- **Swollen lymph nodes**
- **Persistent fever**
- **Lethargy or weakness**
- **Diarrhea or other digestive issues**
- **Reproductive problems (in unspayed females)**



Because FeLV compromises the immune system, infected cats are also at increased risk for developing other diseases and illnesses.

## TESTING FOR FELV

- All cats should be tested for FeLV. A simple blood test can detect the virus, and results are usually available quickly.
- All kittens should be tested, though infection in very young kittens may not show up right away, and your veterinarian may recommend retesting.
- Any new cat should be tested before being introduced to other cats in your household.
- If your cat tests positive for FeLV, vaccination is not recommended, as it will not alter the course of infection and can put added strain on the immune system.
- FeLV vaccines will not cause false-positive results on FeLV tests.

## PREVENTING FELV

- The FeLV vaccine is recommended for all kittens, with the initial series starting as early as 8-12 weeks of age, with a booster given 3-4 weeks later.
- For adult cats, continued vaccination is recommended based on your cat's lifestyle and risk of exposure. Cats that spend time outdoors or live with cats of unknown FeLV status are at the highest risk.
- Indoor-only cats with no exposure to FeLV-positive cats may be able to discontinue the vaccine after their initial kitten series. Talk to your veterinarian about what's right for your cat.
- Keep FeLV-positive cats indoors and separated from uninfected cats to prevent transmission.
- Do not share food bowls, water bowls, or litter boxes between FeLV-positive and FeLV-negative cats.
- No vaccine is 100% protective, so preventing exposure remains important even for vaccinated cats.

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