



cat adoption team

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT FELV

(updated Jan 2026)

We believe that cats who are positive for the Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) can make excellent companions and deserve opportunities for adoption. However, there are some things any prospective adopter should know about FeLV.

What is FeLV?

Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) is not transmissible to humans or any animal except other cats. FeLV weakens the cat's immune system. FeLV-positive cats typically have more difficulty fighting off disease and infections than FeLV-negative cats. According to research, 83% of FeLV-positive cats do not live beyond 4 years after diagnosis. The other 17% are considered carriers, where the disease lies dormant, and they can have a more typical life span. However, this 17% can still spread the virus to other uninfected felines.

How do cats become infected?

FeLV transmission most commonly occurs through close, social contact. Contact with saliva from infected cats is a primary mode of transmission since the concentration of virus is high in saliva. Virus is also shed in blood, urine, feces, nasal secretions, and milk. Sharing food and water dishes, using the same litter box, mutual grooming, and bite wounds are all possible methods of transmission. Infected queens can infect kittens during pregnancy or while nursing.

What kind of special care does an FeLV-positive cat need?

- FeLV weakens the cat's immune system. FeLV-positive cats are also more vulnerable to dental disease, skin problems, infections, and certain types of cancer. Preventive care is particularly important. FeLV-positive cats should eat a healthy diet (raw diets not recommended) and adopters should follow their veterinarian's advice about vaccines and parasite prevention. Just as with any cat, adopters should be attentive to any signs of illness and seek veterinary care when any concerns arise.
- The outdoors is especially dangerous for an FeLV-positive cat because of the potential exposure to diseases, parasites, and injury risks such as other animals and cars. A virus, parasite, or infection that another cat might effectively fight off could make an FeLV-positive cat seriously ill. It is also important to keep FeLV-positive cats indoors to prevent them from spreading the disease to other cats in the area.
- FeLV-positive cats are also more susceptible to stress-related illness. Owners should take extra precautions to reduce potential stress during events like remodeling, moving, and other household changes.
- FeLV-positive cats will only be adopted out to only cat homes or homes with other FeLV-positive cats.



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FELV IS NOT A SIMPLE DISEASE

FelV is a confusing disease and knowledge about the virus is evolving in veterinary medicine. Here are a few definitions that are currently being used in relation to the disease that may indicate the likelihood of the lifespan for the cat. All of these are still considered positive for FelV, but some may live longer than others and be affected by less secondary diseases.

- **High positive:** The result of the testing for the virus was a strong positive result and the cat's lifespan is likely to be reduced with more possibility of secondary issues (71% of cats in one study with the UF Shelter Medicine Program).
- **Low positive:** The result of the testing for the virus was a weak positive result and the cat's lifespan may be normal with lower possibility of secondary issues (23% of cats in the study).
- **Cryptic/negative:** Sometimes the cat's test results have been negative, and sometimes they have been positive. We still consider these cats positive for FelV, but they may have a normal lifespan (6% of the cats in the study).

It's important to remember that cats could change between the different levels (for example, high positive to low positive or vice versa), so one result cannot guarantee that the cat will live a longer or shorter life.