



MARLTON ANIMAL HOSPITAL, P.A.

“WE CARE”

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Feline Leukemia Virus

Feline leukemia is a viral disease, which can produce anemia, kidney failure, liver failure, neurologic problems, cancer and other syndromes in cats. Most commonly, it makes cats more susceptible to various other, often-fatal diseases since feline leukemia virus (FeLV) suppresses the immune system, thereby decreasing the cat's ability to fight off disease.

Clinical signs of the disease are extremely varied since the virus can cause many different types of illness. Patients often have a long history of poor appetite and show evidence of weight loss, depression, some degree of anemia, and perhaps recurrent fevers. Lymphosarcoma (the tumor form) is seen primarily in relatively young cats. These animals may exhibit difficulty breathing, chronic vomiting or diarrhea and/or depression. Two or more syndromes caused by FeLV infection may co-exist. Eighty percent (80%) of otherwise healthy cats that test positive to FeLV will die within three years of becoming infected.

Cats become infected with feline leukemia virus through direct contact with infected cats. The virus can be spread by sharing food bowls, sharing litter pans, mutual grooming, bite wounds, etc. Although the primary vehicle for transmission is saliva, the disease may also be spread via urine, feces, milk and nasal secretions. Cats that are allowed to go outdoors, because of their increased exposure to other cats, are at a higher risk of being infected with feline leukemia virus.

When an infected cat exposes an uninfected cat to the virus, the uninfected cat:

- may not become infected at all.
- may become infected, develop immunity and fight off the virus.
- may become infected, not develop illness, but become a carrier of the virus and be contagious to other cats for an indefinite period of time. These cats become what are called “asymptomatic carriers”.
- may become infected, and after a period of weeks or possibly as long as several years, become fatally ill.

A vaccine is available which may be useful in preventing this disease. We recommend testing cats for FeLV before beginning the vaccination series. A positive test indicates only that the cat has been exposed to FeLV and is infected with the virus at the time of the test. It DOES NOT indicate that the animal is suffering from or will develop cancer or other FeLV related disease, or that it will either develop immunity or become an asymptomatic carrier.

The cats that test positive DO SHED VIRUS and are a source of infection for other cats. A negative test means that there is no detectable virus in the blood at the time of the test. If an owner suspects recent exposure, re-testing is suggested in 3 to 6 months. Unfortunately, nearly thirty percent (30%) of cats with FeLV related diseases test negative (but also are probably not contagious to other cats).

If an otherwise healthy cat tests positive for FeLV, the following options should be considered:

1. **KEEP THE CAT STRICTLY INDOORS.** Allowing them to go outdoors just increases the spread of this deadly disease. Also, much thought should be given as to whether any other cats should be adopted or otherwise acquired and brought into a household with an FeLV positive cat.
2. In a single cat household, the cat may be kept as before, as a strictly indoor pet. The animal may fight off the infection, become an asymptomatic carrier or ultimately die of viral induced disease.
3. In a multi-cat household, the cat may be kept isolated from other cats. The remaining cats should be tested and those that test positive may be kept together, and those that test negative should be vaccinated (even though they're kept isolated). Alternatively, all the cats may be left together with the understanding that additional cats may become infected and die.
4. Cat breeders with positive cats should eliminate these animals from their cattery since they represent an ongoing source of infection. Positive cats can and probably will produce FeLV infected kittens, or suffer from reproductive disorders such as reduced fertility and spontaneous abortions.
5. Euthanasia can be a reasonable option, depending on the owner's circumstances.

When a cat is lost due to an FeLV related disease and the owner wishes to obtain another cat, we recommend waiting at least seven days, disinfecting the house, acquiring an FeLV negative cat and having it vaccinated as soon as possible.

In an effort to decrease the incidence of Feline Leukemia Virus infection, we recommend testing and vaccinating cats. The series of two vaccines given two to four weeks apart may be started as early as nine weeks of age, although for various reasons, we generally wait until the kitten is 14 to 16 weeks old. Adult cats require the same series of two vaccines initially. Thereafter, one yearly booster is required for all cats in order to maintain immunity.