FIV - Feline Immunodeficiency Virus
FeLV - Feline Leukemia Virus

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) and Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) are very likely the two most talked about viruses in feline medicine. Anytime you find a stray cat or kitten or are introducing a new feline friend to your household of cats they should be tested for FIV and FeLV. Due to the ease of transmission, particularly FeLV introducing an untested cat to your other cats poses a huge health risk. If you are adopting from a rescue or shelter most facilities will likely at least screen them for FeLV but typically will screen for both. If you have a single indoor only cat your veterinarian might not be feel as strongly about testing your pet. However, it is always nice to know the FIV and FeLV status of your cats even if they are indoor only. This is because pets that carry these viruses will be affected for life and could affect the lifespan of your pet. These pets will also have lower immune systems so any time they are sick they should be treated promptly and more aggressively. Here we are going to give you the basics of both FIV and FeLV and why these diseases are so important.

Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) is a highly transmissible disease. It is shed in all bodily fluids: saliva, tears, urine, milk, feces, etc. It can also be passed transplacental meaning momma cats can transmit it to their kittens while still in the womb. So who is most at risk? Kittens under 16 weeks of age or cats that are already immunocompromised are at the highest risk. Cats 6 months and older start to develop some innate resistance to the virus, however, are still capable of becoming infected. Once infected the virus will replicate in oral and nasal tissues before moving to the bloodstream and eventually infecting the bone marrow. From there it can go throughout the entire body (spleen, lymph nodes, GI tract, salivary glands, etc). The more chronic or repetitive the exposure the more likely a cat is to become infected. Cats that become FeLV infected can remain clinically normal for many years. However, FeLV positive cats often die within 3-5 years of infection. So what clinical signs can FeLV cause? Honestly, it can present as almost anything making it difficult to diagnose at times. A few signs you can see could range from intestinal inflammation, reproductive disorders, enlarged lymph nodes, immune mediated diseases, ocular inflammation, anemia, leukopenia or leukocytosis (high or low white blood cell counts), chronic or recurrent infections that are difficult to clear. There is no cure for FeLV and often prognosis is poor once cats become clinical. Thus it is so important to keep cats up to date on their FeLV vaccines.

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) is much harder to transmit than FeLV. Often by saliva via deep bite wounds. However, it can also be transmitted in utero or via the milk in infected mothers. Clinical symptoms typically won't arise until older versus FeLV, often over 5- 6 years of age. As fighting is the most common mode of transmission, outdoor cats, particularly outdoor males, are considered at highest risk. After a cat becomes infected they can have a long asymptomatic period ranging from months to years. Symptoms can range in presentation and can be subtle including weight loss, dental or gingival diseases, chronic ocular or nasal infections, GI or skin symptoms, enlarged lymph nodes, fever, etc. There is no vaccine for FIV, because of this we recommend cats that are at increased exposure such as outdoor or indoor/outdoor cats should at least be screened yearly or after any known fighting incident. Once a cat develops clinical symptoms, prognosis is often poor.