



## FELINE LEUKEMIA VIRUS (FeLV):

### What You Need to Know

Once one of the most devastating and deadly diseases in cats, the number of cases of Feline Leukemia has been reduced dramatically over the past 25 years thanks to the use of vaccines to effectively protect at-risk cats from becoming infected with this **often fatal** virus.

\* **How Do Cats Get Leukemia:** Feline Leukemia is spread directly from one cat to another cat through **saliva** (such as through **bite wounds** as well as **cats that groom one another**), nasal secretions, urine, feces and even the milk of an infected cat to nursing kittens. The virus does not survive very long outside a cat's body, so it is uncommon for the virus to spread through shared food and water bowls or from litter boxes.

\* **Which Cats Are Most At Risk of Getting this Deadly Disease:** Since the virus is spread directly from one cat to another, those cats that go outdoors and come into contact with other cats are at the highest risk of exposure to the virus. **Even cats that are exclusively indoors are at risk if they are in contact with un-vaccinated cats that go outside and interact with other cats.**

\* **What Are the Signs or Symptoms of a Cat with Leukemia:** On appearance alone, it is not possible to tell if a cat has Feline Leukemia. In the early stages of an infection, a cat may not show any signs of disease whatsoever. However, anytime we see a cat that has any of the following symptoms: loss of appetite, losing weight, an on-going fever, inflammation / excessive redness in the mouth, pale gums, on-going diarrhea, and generally ADR (Ain't Doin' Right), we always suspect Leukemia.

\* **How Do I Find Out if My Cat Has Leukemia:** We have very reliable tests to see if a cat has Leukemia or not. A small blood sample provides us with results in 10-12 minutes. We use the term "Positive" for Feline Leukemia if a cat has the disease. If they do not have the disease, they are "Negative". Obviously, we always hope for "Negative". When we test your kitty for Feline Leukemia, we are also testing for Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV).

\* **How Do Vets Treat a Cat With Leukemia:** Unfortunately, **we do not have a cure for a cat with Leukemia.** There are a number of therapies that may reduce the severity of signs and symptoms of the disease for a while, but there is no medication yet that can reliably help kitties once they are infected and showing evidence of the disease.

\* **How Long Do Infected Cats Live:** While a cat with Feline Leukemia can live a normal life for a long period of time, once we begin to see signs and symptoms of the disease, the typical life expectancy is only about 2 years.

\* **At What Age Can I Start Vaccinating My Cat Against Leukemia:** We can start vaccinating kittens as early as 8 weeks of age.

\* **How Often Do Cats Need to be Vaccinated:** After giving the first Feline Leukemia vaccine, all kittens / cats need a 2<sup>nd</sup> vaccine / booster in 3 to 5 weeks. With the Leukemia vaccine that we give at Carolina Value Pet Care, the next vaccine is not given again until 1 year later (after the 2<sup>nd</sup> vaccine is given). Then the vaccine is given every 2 years. As an example: A 3 month old kitten receives its 1<sup>st</sup> vaccine at 3 months of age ... then approx. one month later (at 4 months of age) we give the booster ... then again 1 year (12 months) later (~16 months of age) ... then every 2 years.

\* **If I Have an Infected Cat that is NOT Showing any Signs of Illness, Can She/He still be Contagious to Other Cats:** Unfortunately, YES. We do see a very small number of cats that may never show signs of disease, yet test Positive, and these kitties are every bit as much contagious as a cat that is not showing symptoms.

\* **What about my Dog. Is She / He at Risk:** Good news for dogs ! The disease is only a concern for Cats.

\* **What if I Find a Stray Cat That Tests “Positive” for Feline Leukemia, and I Cannot Keep it Indoors or Away from Other Cats:** This is a very challenging decision that only you, the pet parent, can make. I feel that if you have a cat that tests Positive for Feline Leukemia (meaning that they do have the disease), you have an obligation to protect all other cats from this infected and contagious cat. Putting the cat back outdoors knowing it could continue to infect other cats with this deadly virus is, in my opinion, reckless and unethical. But you do have some options:

- 1) Try to re-home the cat with someone who does not have another cat. But of course be sure to advise the new potential pet parent that this kitty has Feline Leukemia and can be contagious to other cats.
- 2) There are individuals who take in only cats with Feline Leukemia, so they are among other cats with Leukemia. Check with area Veterinarians or Humane Societies to see if they know of anyone who can assist.
- 3) Unfortunately, if you don't have any other options, then euthanizing the cat with Leukemia is much preferred to letting the cat expose countless other cats unnecessarily

\* **What If I Find a Stray Cat / Kitten That Tests ‘Positive’, but Is Not Showing Any Symptoms of Disease and We Decide We Want to Keep The Kitty:** As mentioned earlier, there are cats that test Positive, but are not showing signs or symptoms of the disease. (And there are a small number of cats that test Positive, and never develop symptoms.) I recommend re-testing those cats in 6 to 8 weeks to see if they still test Positive. Over many years, I have seen both cats and kittens that are not showing symptoms yet test Positive. But if they have a healthy immune / self-defense system, they may be able to fight off the virus. While certainly not always the case, but there are many times when we re-test a cat / kitten and they have a Negative test result. We start the vaccines for those cats right away if they will be at risk of exposure to the virus.

\* **What If I Find a Stray Cat and Choose Not to Test the Kitty or I Cannot Afford the Test, Is It OK to Give the Feline Leukemia Vaccines Anyway:** Yes. If you give the Feline Leukemia vaccine to a cat that has the disease, the vaccine will not have an effect on the cat. It will neither make the disease worse, nor will it provide any benefit to help the cat

\* **If I Have a Cat (or Cats) in my House that Has NOT Been Vaccinated Against Feline Leukemia and I Find a Stray Kitten / Cat, What Should I Do:** Great question. If you decide to bring the new kitty to your home, we strongly advise keeping the new cat completely away from your other cats until you have the stray cat tested for Feline Leukemia and FIV. If this is not possible, then we suggest either finding someone else who can take care of the cat until you can get the new cat tested ... or contact your local Animal Shelter or Humane Society to take the cat.

**I Just Got a New Cat and I Plan to Keep Her / Him Totally Indoors. Why does Carolina Value Pet Care Recommend Getting the Feline Leukemia Vaccine if My New Kitty Won't Be Going Outside:** I understand your intentions ... but I also know cats and their tendencies. While most cats are content to stay inside, we see *many* cats that have a strong sense of wanderlust and want to go outside (to hunt, to explore, to create their own territory ... to be a cat!). On the chance that your new kitty at some point decides or demands to spend time outside, by getting the Feline Leukemia vaccine (in addition to Rabies and Feline Distemper vaccines), you know he/she will be protected. You'll generally discover over the course of the next year (when vaccines are due again) if it is clear that your cat wants to stay inside and has no intention of going outdoors. If that is the case, then fine, we will not need to continue giving the Feline Leukemia vaccine (but he / she will still need Rabies and Feline Distemper).

- Dr Bob Parrish

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