

ORCHARD HILLS VETERINARY HOSPITAL

Feline Leukaemia Virus

What is Feline Leukaemia?

Feline Leukaemia (FeLV) is a retrovirus which affects the cat's body by inserting copies of its genetic material into that of the cells they have infected. From there the virus works by attacking the immune system making our cats more susceptible to other infections, as well as being more susceptible to developing cancer. Being an immunosuppressant, FeLV generally does not cause death or illness itself but rather through other diseases such as flu and feline enteritis.

How can my cat catch the virus?

Feline Leukaemia virus is relatively fragile in the external environment which means it can only be transmitted by direct contact between cats. Any cat infected with FeLV can serve as a source of infection. The virus is shed from the body via the saliva, nasal secretions, urine, faeces and milk from lactating queens. Transmission occurs when infected cats interact with others and may occur from a bite wound, mutual grooming, communal food and litter trays, suckling kittens or kitten's in-utero.

Is my cat at risk from the virus?

Unfortunately there is no way to estimate the risk for any individual cat. All cats are at risk if they come into contact with other cats whether they are wild or domestic. However a much higher risk is present for those cats in breeding establishments and catteries, as spread generally involves close contact. Prevention through vaccination is much better than treatment, which is mostly unsuccessful. (see below)

What signs should I look for?

FeLV can adversely affect the cat's body in many ways. Most commonly it can cause cancer, blood disorders and varied states of immune deficiency. Visible signs can include weight loss, loss of appetite, lethargy, fever, diarrhoea, seizures, behavioural changes and general poor health.

These signs can be extremely varied as infection with the virus makes the body susceptible to a whole range of disease and infections.

What treatments are available for the disease?

Unfortunately, once a cat 'is sick with FeLV' there is only supportive treatment available. As a consequence the emphasis is on prevention of the disease and limiting its spread, rather than treatment.

What about the vaccine?

There is an excellent vaccine available to protect your cat which has been used in Australia for many years.

Kittens need two initial injections, generally at 6-8 weeks of age and 10-12 weeks of age, then yearly thereafter. Adult cats who were not vaccinated as kittens or who have not stayed up-to-date with their yearly vaccinations with also require 2 booster vaccinations. Adult cats at risk may also be required to have a blood test to ensure they have not already contracted the virus.

What if my cat has the FeLV?

Unfortunately there are no cures for FeLV, the main aim is to keep your cat as comfortable as possible and treat the symptoms as they come. Precautionary measures should be taken however to ensure that your cat does not infect others. This can be done by;

- Keeping infected cats indoors and away from other household cats.
- De-sex your cat
- Avoid uncooked foods such as raw meat and eggs, dairy, to reduce the risk of food-borne bacterial infections occurring.
- Have a health assessment performed at your local veterinarian at least every six months.

Can I be infected with FeLV?

There are no studies to support the transmission of FeLV from cats to humans, however secondary infections and diseases caused by the virus, may be passed to humans. It is therefore recommended that people with a suppressed immune system such as the elderly, pregnant women and very young children should avoid contact with infected cats.

If you have any queries or wish more information, please feel free to contact the clinic any time. (02) 4730 2027