

How can I protect my cat from FIV and FeLV? by Dr. Jennifer Broadhurst, Jacksonville Humane Society

Although they may appear healthy, 2 to 3 percent of cats living in the United States are infected with the feline immunodeficiency virus (**FIV**) or the feline leukemia virus.

FIV causes immune suppression and is very similar to **HIV** in humans, while feline leukemia causes immune suppression and cancer. **Virus Transmission FIV** is commonly transmitted through bites. The virus is most common in outdoor cats that fight with other felines.

FIV can also spread through sexual contact or from a mother cat to her kittens. Feline Leukemia is transmitted through bites, grooming, shared food, water bowls and litter boxes. Kittens can also contract the virus from their mothers during birth or through nursing. Neither of the viruses are transferable to people or dogs, but there is a chance the virus can spread among cats living in the same household.

Diagnosis The ELISA (Enzyme-Linked ImmunoSorbent Assay) test, also known as the “snap” test, is a blood test used to detect FIV and feline leukemia. Your veterinarian can test your cat for FIV or feline leukemia in his / her office. If your cat’s “snap” test is positive, laboratory tests can confirm the diagnosis. Laboratory tests are more expensive than “snap” tests, so they are most often used to confirm the results of a “snap” test. A cat does not develop antibodies for either virus right after exposure, so the viruses are not detectable right away. Feline leukemia is detectable four to 12 weeks after exposure. FIV is detectable two to four weeks after exposure.

Prevention To protect cats from the spread of FIV or feline leukemia, all cats should be tested for FIV and feline leukemia before being adopted or introduced into a new household. Cats should be retested 60 days after the first test to ensure the cat was not exposed to FIV or feline leukemia right before the first test. FIV-positive cats should be kept inside at all times. Because the virus can spread among housemates, FIV-infected cats should not live with non-FIV cats. These same recommendations are also true for feline leukemia positive cats. Your veterinarian can give your cat a vaccination to help protect against feline leukemia and FIV. These vaccines are only recommended for cats at risk of exposure to the viruses (such as cats living outside). Note that if your cat receives an FIV vaccine, your pet will test positive for the virus.

Remember, if you have any health care concerns or want to know more about your pet’s specific medical needs, always talk to your veterinarian. Establishing a good relationship with a veterinarian is an important part of your pet’s health.