

Feline Leukemia FAQ

FeLV—or *Feline Leukemia Virus*—is a virus that affects the immune system of a cat. It isn't a form of cancer, but may weaken the immune system and make opportunistic infections and certain types of cancer more likely. Cats with FeLV can live normal, happy lives—they may just have a shorter life expectancy than FeLV negative cats. Historically, cats with this disease have been euthanized the minute they are diagnosed. Austin Pets Alive! has taken a different stance, allowing FeLV cats to live with dignity and be adopted into loving homes—however, we can only continue to save these cats if people are willing to foster and adopt them.

Is FeLV Contagious?

Only to other cats via prolonged, direct contact with an infected cat's saliva (sharing food bowls, grooming each other, etc.), urine, blood, and from queen to kittens during pregnancy. Due to this, FeLVs can only live with other FeLV+ cats and are indoors only. The virus itself is not airborne and dies rapidly in the environment, so you won't have to worry about carrying the virus on clothes when you leave the house or have friends over.

Are the FeLV+ cats inherently more sick?

No. The FeLV+ cats appear and act just as healthy as the other cats that we have available for adoption. They do, however, have an increased risk of getting sick. This makes protecting them from stress, feeding a high quality diet, and addressing health problems as soon as they arise critical. You wouldn't know a cat had FeLV by just looking at it, and many people have FeLV+ cats in their home and don't even know it because they never got them tested.

How long do FeLV+ cats live?

It can be hard to say! There are stages of FeLV which may impact lifespan, and a cat's viral load may change over time. From available research, progressively infected FeLV+ cats often live between 2-6 years after diagnosis if they were diagnosed as adults, and 6 months-2 years after diagnosis if they were diagnosed as kittens. Regressively infected cats are showing normal lifespans in research studies. However, it is possible for FeLV+ cats to live both shorter and longer lives than the ranges we've listed here; every cat is unique. The most important thing to remember is that no matter how much time they have, it will be better because they're with you in a loving home.

Do FeLV+ cats need special medication or care?

Not while they are healthy. If/when they do eventually get sick, they will often get very sick quickly and may need more care than a normal cat since their immune system may be hampered. This is why APA! offers complimentary care of illnesses that may arise due to a cat's feline leukemia status.

Why do shelters usually automatically euthanize FeLV+ cats?

There are many myths out there about feline leukemia. As a result, it can be challenging to find people willing to adopt or foster FeLV+ cats. Some organizations feel this is more than they can handle or that they do not have the resources to shelter these cats.

FeLV Post Adoption Treatment Coverage

Adopting a FeLV+ Cat From Austin Pets Alive!

If you are interested in adopting a FeLV+ cat from Austin Pets Alive!, please know that the APA! medical clinic will provide complementary treatment related to their FeLV status and in line with palliative care policies. In the category of palliative care, heroic measures such as hospitalization, advanced imaging, specialist referrals, and invasive surgery **would not** be pursued. Minimal laboratory or other diagnostic tests may be warranted. Pain medication, supplements, prescription diets, or other medications to treat chronic conditions would be utilized. The focus for these patients is on quality of life.

Please note that APA! cannot provide emergency overnight care for adopted animals, so if you have an overnight emergency, you will need to contact your private vet. **However, the APA! medical clinic will see patients during regular business hours for the following potentially FeLV related symptoms:**

Post-adoption FeLV care provided by APA!

The APA! medical clinic will see patients for the following FeLV-related symptoms **after receiving photos/videos emailed to clinic@austinpetsalive.org:**

- **Upper Respiratory Infection (URI)**
 - Sneezing
 - Yellow or green nasal discharge
 - Watery eyes or green/yellow discharge from eyes
 - Congestion sounds
 - **Please email photos/videos for assessment**
- **Respiratory distress/labored breathing**
 - Abdominal effort while breathing (flanks visibly moving)
 - Difficulty breathing in general
 - **Please email videos for assessment**
- **Not eating (inappetence)**
 - Eating less than 50% of normal portions for 48+ hours
 - Needs to be hand-fed or coaxed into eating, but continues to eat less than 50%
 - If you suspect your cat has not eaten in 24 hours, offer different kinds of dry and wet food and begin monitoring with photos/notes of their progress (if any).
 - If the APA! clinic cannot see you within 72 hours following the initial 48 hours of inappetence, it is **strongly advised that you seek a private or ER vet.**
- **Lethargy**
 - Inability to lift head
 - Can't get up (different from *won't* get up)
 - Hiding when they previously did not
 - **Please email videos of energy levels and movement**
- **Dehydration**
 - Can have symptoms similar to lethargy and anemia
 - [Perform a skin tent](#) on your cat to verify
 - **Please email videos of the skin tent test for assessment**
- **Fever**
 - Fever over 103 lasting for 1+ hour
 - May be present with lethargy and/or not eating
 - **Please email photo of [temperature reading](#) for assessment**
- **Eye abnormalities**
 - Abnormal pupil dilation (*anisocoria*): a common FeLV-related occurrence, not always indicative of medical urgency. If no other symptoms, just monitor
 - Red tinting in/through eyes

- **Please email photos for assessment**
- **GI lasting over 72 hours**
 - Only if symptoms happen without a recent change in diet, environment, routine, medication, travel, or supplements over the previous 2 weeks
 - Known history of chronic or ongoing issues
- **Lymphoma or other cancers**
 - For hospice and end-of-life care
 - **Will automatically be approved to be seen by APA! vets**
- **Anemia**
 - For hospice and end-of-life care
 - Pale/white gums, nose, paws
 - **Please email photos for assessment**
 - May vocalize or be cold to the touch (body and limbs)
 - Can look like lethargy, dehydration, and respiratory distress
 - **Will automatically be approved to be seen by APA! vets**

If you start to notice any of the above symptoms, please contact the APA! medical clinic to report the start of issues, and document your pet's progress on your own in the meantime. If your cat continues to decline in the timelines listed above (or 48-72 hours since the onset of symptoms), please reach back out to us!

The APA medical clinic is a non-profit shelter clinic, and therefore not a full service clinic. However, we are able to provide the following treatments and/or diagnostics for adopted FeLV cats:

- **Supportive care**

At the time of the appointment - fluids under the skin, vitamin b12, anti-nausea medication, prescription pain medications, appetite stimulants, anti-inflammatory medications, and if a bacterial infection is noted on exam, antibiotics (at vet's discretion). For terminal conditions, euthanasia when quality of life has declined.

- **Common Terminal Conditions**

FeLV cats can sometimes be susceptible to terminal (incurable) diseases, such as terminal anemia ("end stage anemia"), cancer/lymphoma, fluid buildup in their chest, and other comorbidities with their immune system. At your appointment with the APA! Medical Clinic, a veterinarian will examine your cat to screen them for FeLV-related conditions like these examples, and if the exam warrants it, we will run a blood test and/or X-rays of the chest to gather more information. Once a presumptive diagnosis is determined, we can provide supportive-care medications based on symptoms. **If a terminal diagnosis is made**, we will provide end-of-life care, including euthanasia when the time comes. *If further diagnostics or treatments are desired, you will need to follow up with your private vet.* [Please see the FeLV End of Life Care section below for more details.](#)

When to seek non-APA! help

APA! will not treat adopted FeLV cats for the following symptoms:

- Vaccines, flea preventatives, deworming, or other routine care
- Dental or gum disease
- Traumatic injuries such as broken bones, soft tissue injuries, lameness
- Ingestion of toxins, or foreign bodies
- Skin conditions
- Ear infections
- Urinary tract infections/Urinary blockages
- Skin masses unrelated to lymphoma
- Constipation
- General age maladies such as arthritis, kidney disease, diabetes, heart disease

FeLV spay/neuter policy

In order to reduce the chance of stress related illness, all FeLV+ cats need to be altered after:

- The age of 6 months old
- They have been in a home for 2+ weeks *before* surgery
- They will stay in that home for 2+ weeks *after* surgery

Local vets who treat FeLVs

The following are a few local vet clinics who have experience treating FeLV cats:

- **Corner Vet**
2400 E Cesar Chavez Austin, TX 78702
(512) 236-8000
- **Lake Austin Blvd Animal Hospital**
2301 Lake Austin Blvd, Austin, TX 78703
(512) 474-8888
- **Riverside Veterinary Clinic**
2400 E. Oltorf Austin, TX 78741
512-444-3111
- **South Austin Cat Hospital**
11215 S. IH-35 #109 Austin, TX 78747
(512) 910-2287
- **Great Oaks Animal Hospital, Dr. Grimm**
15950 Great Oaks Dr, Round Rock, TX 78681
(512) 388-4551
- **Brykerwood Veterinary Clinic, Dr. Heideman**
1501 W 35th St, Austin, TX 78703
(512) 454-3833
- **Star of Texas Vet Hospital**
10706 Brodie Ln, Austin, TX 78748
(512) 377-9800

FeLV End of Life Care Information

Though no one wishes to think about losing the cat they are adopting, we want to ensure that our FeLV adopters feel both prepared and supported given the shortened average lifespan of FeLV+ cats.

Terminal Illness and End of Life Care

When FeLV+ cats reach the end of their lives, it is common for them to experience a rapid decline and become terminal in a matter of days or weeks. At that point, the goal is to determine if the cat has reached the end of life, and then to both prevent and alleviate their suffering if so. APA! may examine and perform non-invasive testing to help determine the stage of health, as well as listening to your feedback on the cat's quality of life. If the cat has reached known markers of terminal illness, such as severe anemia or anorexia, APA! will offer complimentary and humane end of life services at that time.

If you elect to continue life-saving efforts after a euthanasia recommendation, APA! will do our best to make the cat comfortable, help you understand what to expect, and refer you to your private veterinarian. If you choose euthanasia with APA!, we encourage you to be present during the humane euthanasia of your adopted cat for his or her comfort. Afterward, you may: (1) take your cat home for burial, (2) have APA! arrange for your pet to be communally cremated at no cost, or (3) pay for private cremation if you would like to receive your cat's ashes back. Our clinic receptionists will assist you in this decision.

You may also elect in-home euthanasia at your own expense. Many find this option more comfortable for themselves, as well as their cat. Below are private, in-home euthanasia providers recommended by the APA! Cat Staff:

Private in-home euthanasia options

- Compassionate Pet Vet
 - (512) 553-1331
 - compassionatepetvet.com
- Healing Arts Veterinary House Calls
 - (512) 576-0929
 - healingartshousecalls.com
- Doorstep Vet
 - (512) 387-1555
 - doorstepvetaustin.com

Grief Support

We're committed to supporting our FeLV+ adopters from the moment you first met your cat, to the moment you say goodbye. The APA! FeLV program is always here to help. Please feel free to reach out to us at felv@austinpetsalive.org, or utilize any of the grief support resources below:

- ASPCA Grief Support Hotline: 877-GRIEF-10
- [Association of Pet Loss and Bereavement](#)
- [Austin Pet Loss Support Group](#)
 - 2nd Wednesday of each month, 7:15-8:30pm
 - Located at *The Healing House Studio* (701 Morrow St, Austin, TX 78752)

Keeping your FeLV healthy

FeLV cats thrive best in stress-free environments, as they're more prone to getting stress-induced illnesses like URIs, UTIs, decreased appetite, GI upset, and other signs of chronic stress that can flare up issues with their immune system. In order to make your FeLV cat comfortable, we'd recommend the following tips:

Setting up your space

All FeLVs must be kept **indoors only**. Because they are immunocompromised, they are unable to withstand the potential viruses, diseases, and bacteria that they'll be exposed to from both the environment and other cats. To keep FeLVs comfortable in your home, we recommend:

- Starting them in a bathroom for the first 5-10 days to decompress, monitor food intake and litter box output, and get used to the routine of your home
- Doing a slow intro with all other pets in the home during their decompression period
- Giving them plenty of covered hiding spots around the house
- Keeping their litter and food consistent as they transition to your home, and then slowly changing to any new brands over a 5 day period (increments of 20% of the new brand per day for both food and litter)
- FeLVs **cannot eat raw diets** due to their immune system not being able to filter out bad bacteria from their GI tracts, but they can eat high-protein diets and wet food is always recommended
- Providing them with extensive enrichment options in their space
- **Do not move them excessively in under a 2 week period**, as this can very easily trigger several stress-illnesses

Introducing your cat to other pets

To introduce FeLVs to other pets in the home, we would always encourage a *slow intro over at least the first week*, but **ideally 7-10 days**. This would involve separating the pets into designated spaces like a bathroom, bedroom, spare room, walk-in closet, etc., so that they don't directly interact. From there, you can spend that time doing *indirect* contact with some of the following options:

- Scent swapping their blankets and toys, or anything plush that holds scent. Doing this with your own clothing in their spaces will also help prevent any territorial guarding of *you* specifically
- Letting them sniff each other under the door
- Letting one pet roam the house for 1-2 hours, then separating them again while the other pet roams and smells their scent on everything, and alternating this several times with each separate room
- Having the pets meet through a glass door, screen door, or baby gate
- Feeding pets on opposite sides of a door to prevent food/resource guarding

Monitoring stress

Using the [Fear Free scale for cats](#), you can monitor the fear, stress, and anxiety (FAS) levels in your FeLV while they adjust to your home. This will help you identify patterns and triggers for them, and monitoring FAS can help keep your cat safe, healthy, and advocated for so that you know what situations and triggers they don't do well with.

Enrichment activities

Providing enrichment helps keep your cat's brain stimulated and energy expended in a positive way. Some of the options below would provide great enrichment to keep them healthy and happy:

1. [Various types of interactive toys](#)
2. Sprinkling catnip around the room to redirect attention
3. Various [puzzle feeders](#) or [stim toys](#)
4. Brain-stimulation games like [wrapping cat treats/kibble in a towel](#), rolling it up, and letting cats unwrap it. This can also be done with tossing treats into a [cardboard box with crumpled paper inside](#) of it
5. If short on time, try [people-free wand toys](#)
6. Letting cats chase an ice cube across the floor
7. Freezing ice cubes onto a licki mat so that they have 2 layers to work through (the ice cubes can be frozen Churu or wet food on top of a frozen licki mat of other textured food)
8. Mental stimulation from [high-five training](#) or ['touch' training](#) can help redirect away from attacking your hands/legs, and that mental energy being used can wear them out. This is also great if you know of any particular treats that they loves and will respond to it
9. Getting a [bird/squirrel feeder](#) that attaches to the window so that they can sit and watch what's going on, and burn off energy by trying to tap at them from the window
10. If you have a cat tree, hide snacks and catnip around the levels of the tree for them to find

Giving your foster their meds

In keeping with a low-stress lifestyle for FeLVs, we have the following Fear Free and Force Free handling + Cooperative Care tips for any cats who require medication:

- Seeking out resources from [Fear Free trainings](#) or [certified techs](#), or [full webinars](#) from Fear Free professionals ([Tabitha Kucera](#) has worked with APA! previously)
- Trying [force free, light-restraint](#) handling methods [for med time](#)
- Try [cooperative care for oral meds](#)
- For toweling and cat burritos: try sprinkling catnip on the towels/blankets beforehand to make them more appealing
- Utilize positive reinforcement for the meds, going to the vet, before/after medical handling, and en route to the vet. Doing this will help with overall enrichment and association between these stressors, that way they gradually become easier to perform over time with consistency
- Try stress-reducing tactics [for trips to the vet](#)
- Look into [Fear Free Happy Homes](#) to keep life consistently stress free
- Carrier training (at home):
 - Take your carrier apart and place only the bottom of the carrier in your space
 - Place a fleece or other comfortable material inside
 - Play with them in and around it, place treats in and around it
 - Set up a treat station (ex: mason jar with treats nearby for easy access), reinforce when the cat happens to lay in the carrier, but can also reinforce verbally
 - Once they're reliable with staying in the carrier, you can also try to give meds in it with all of these other techniques. This will make it easier to do vet exams from their carrier to reduce stress in the vet office
- [Syringe training](#) is a good thing to do **BEFORE** they need meds, so they're already conditioned
- Try the [1-2-3 medication game](#) for smooth interaction and positive reinforcement (this can also be done 2-3 times a day for additional trust building, you'd just replace medication with something small like a Temptations treat)

FeLV diets & restrictions

As stated above, FeLVs **cannot eat raw diets** due to their immune system being unable to regulate their GI tract against the potential bacteria in raw foods. In addition to using [quality probiotics](#), serving them a [high protein diet](#) and wet food are always encouraged:

Higher budget	Lower budget
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tiki Cat (wet is better for protein)• Nulo• Ziwi Peak• Open Farm• The Honest Kitchen• Fussie Cat• N&D cat food	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Purina ONE grain-free pate• Fancy Feast classic pate• Merrick• Wellness Core+• The Honest Kitchen's dehydrated pate• Weruva (and Weruva BFF)• Nacho

* Including supplements like probiotics and [Alaskan salmon oil](#) are also fantastic for their health and GI tract

Wet food supplements

If your cat is on a wet-only diet or needs help with water intake, you can also try to supplement this with cat-specific broths and gravies (not human ones from the grocery store, as those usually have onions or too much sodium for cats). [Open Farm](#), [Nulo](#), [Nacho](#), [Merrick](#), and [Friskies](#) all sell bone broths, Tiki Cat sells [broths](#) and [mousse](#), Purina sells [HydraCare](#) gravy, and The Honest Kitchen makes both a [probiotic goat milk powder](#) for hydration and a [dehydrated](#) food that becomes an instant soup pate when mixed with water.