

Austin Pets Alive! created the most robust feline leukemia shelter program in the world and has become the epicenter of shelter-based FeLV research and care. Our protocols for FeLV+ cats are continually evolving in alignment with the cutting edge research happening in our program and with over a decade of experience in saving viral positive cats. As such, Austin Pets Alive! realizes cats testing positive for feline leukemia are equally deserving and capable of our full efforts in care, advocacy, and adoption.

Austin Pets Alive! debunks the myth that FeLV+ cats are sick or suffering and that these cats are unwanted. FeLV+ cats have the same quality of life as a negative cat, can recover from routine illness, and have proven to be highly adoptable with thousands of viral-positive cats adopted to date. In fact, APA! research shows a higher adopter satisfaction and attachment rate to FeLV+ cats than to adopted viral negative control cats.

In this toolkit, we will provide the information and resources necessary to start and maintain a Feline Leukemia program by covering:

### [What is FeLV and What Myths are Currently Surrounding It](#)

### [Medical Implications of Feline Leukemia](#)

### [Housing Feline Leukemia Positive Cats](#)

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### What is FeLV?

FeLV, or Feline Leukemia Virus, is a virus that affects the immune system of a cat. It isn't a form of cancer, but is a virus that may weaken the immune system and may 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.

### FeLV Myths & Facts

**Myth:** FeLV is highly contagious and easily spread from cat to cat.

**Fact:** Transmission of FeLV from cat to cat requires sharing bodily fluids from mating, from queen to kitten, or prolonged and repeated exposure between cats.

**Myth:** FeLV is a cancer.

**Fact:** FeLV is a virus. It is not a cancer.

**Myth:** Cats with FeLV are sick and suffering.

**Fact:** While the virus weakens the immune system, leaving the cat more susceptible to illness, the virus itself does not cause pain. FeLV+ cats look and act just like any other cat and can live long, happy lives.

**Myth:** Cats who test positive for FeLV should be euthanized.

**Fact:** Firstly, there is no one perfect, definitive test for FeLV and tests are often wrong, show only exposure to the virus versus infection, and results can change over time. Cats should never be euthanized based upon a test result. Secondly, FeLV+ cats can live long and happy lives and are just as deserving of life.

**Myth:** A cat with FeLV is very expensive to adopt.

**Fact:** At APA!, adoption fees for FeLV+ cats are waived and we provide all medical care related to the virus for the life of the cat so increased medical costs are never a burden. Even elsewhere though, FeLV+ cats may not present as more expensive because once they have truly reached the end of their life, heroic measures are often not appropriate to pursue.

**Myth:** My other pets may catch leukemia from the cat, or I may get leukemia from the cat.

**Fact:** FeLV is only contagious to other cats. No other species can acquire FeLV, including dogs, birds, hamsters, or humans.

### Medical Implications of Feline Leukemia

Feline Leukemia itself does not require any additional medical care, however, FeLV+ cats are more apt to acquire various illnesses including:

- Upper respiratory infections (colored nasal discharge in combination with loss of appetite and/or eye discharge with eye squinting )
- Labored breathing
- Inappetence/anorexia
- Unexplained weight loss and/or lethargy - a usually energetic and outgoing kitty is now withdrawn and/or unwilling to play
- Lymphoma or other cancers
- Anemia

**Common Terminal Conditions:** FeLV cats can be susceptible to terminal (incurable) disease processes such as cancer/lymphoma, terminal anemia, and fluid production within their belly and/or chest (FIP).

### Providing Medical Support to Fosters and Adopters

If you have a vet on staff, one aspect that's very helpful for getting FeLV+ cats out of the shelter and into homes (foster or adoptive) is offering FeLV-related medical care.

For respiratory illness, which is most common, we prescribe antibiotics. Azithromycin is the first choice for mild respiratory infections and if there is no response we increase to a more potent antibiotic, Baytril. For more serious illness, we provide palliative care and end of life services (euthanasia).

Providing post-adoptive medical care helps eliminate one of the biggest barriers to adoption– the fear that adopting a FeLV+ will be expensive and unaffordable. Only about 1/3 of our adopters use the coverage, and it costs us on average about \$30 per appointment, but it makes such a huge difference in an adopter's peace of mind. An adopter would still be responsible for care that is not felv-related, such as preventatives, injury, skin conditions, GI issues, etc.

For terminal illness, we will do a small blood test to check for anemia and/or x-rays of the chest to screen for cancer. Once a presumptive diagnosis is determined, we can provide supportive-care medications based on symptoms. If a terminal diagnosis is made, we provide end-of-life care including euthanasia when the time comes. If further diagnostics or treatments are desired, the adopter can follow up with their private vet.

All FeLV+ cats must be 6 months old and in a foster or adoptive home for 2 weeks prior to spay / neuter surgery.

### **Housing Feline Leukemia Cats**

APA! Has a dedicated space for Feline Leukemia cats, however FeLV+ cats can stay in the same cattery as cats without FeLV without spreading the virus, so long as all FeLV+ cats are housed in a group rooms with only other FeLV cats or have their own unique kennel, carrier, or condo providing a simple physical barrier. This applies to transportation, shelter housing, and foster housing. No special accommodation in shelter housing is needed for FeLV+ cats provided the location does not expose the FeLV+ cat to preventable risk.

We use an open room with a capacity of 10 cats and have 4 singles reserved for cats with contagious illness or cats who are unaltered with a different gender from cats in the general population area.

Shelter supplies will not require designation for FeLV-only use. That is, FeLV+ cats do not require their own living supplies such as bowls, litter boxes, or toys. No specialized cleaning protocols are required for FeLV housing areas or items used by FeLV+ cats; the same APA! cleaning protocols are sufficient.

Staff provides food and medicine for on-site cats, but volunteers can refill dry food, top off water, scoop litter boxes, deep clean condos, and provide enrichment and socialization.

Only about 10% of our FeLV+ cats are housed onsite, which is why it's important to build a robust foster program.

### Starting and Maintaining a FeLV+ Foster Program

- **Recruit Fosters**

- Inform potential fosters: FeLV+ cats have the same day to day lives and all cats deserve love - spread current information
- Reach out to current fosters: Felvies can be fostered with other species, just not FeLV- cats. Fosters can still foster negative cats after positive cats get adopted
- Social Media Marketing: Facebook posts/live; Instagram; TikTok
- Send out foster pleas to volunteers, donors, and members of the community
  - Send out 1-2 times per day
  - Send funny, unique pleas – get their attention
  - Stress urgency– Other shelters would euthanize. Let fosters be the hero- you are TRULY saving these lives.
  - Make pleas clever and captivating
  - Highlight cat’s personality
  - Attach PDF’s on FeLV information and Fostering (see examples in the protocols & SOPs section)

- **Support Fosters**

- Send welcome emails and check in!
- Respond quickly to foster needs— treat fosters like GOLD!
- Foster Mentorship: Be there to answer questions and provide same day support
- Clinic Support: Give fosters access to routine / non emergency medical support within 24 hours as well as emergency support. If you do not have a clinic email us to discuss other ways you can support your fosters!
- Create email templates for routine questions - medical, behavioral, and adoption related
- Offer foster sitting: This incentivizes keeping a potential longer stay foster
- Build relationships: Know who can be contacted for higher medical needs, who prefers sitting gigs, etc and contact them directly when need arises
- Facebook groups: Create a support / networking groups for FeLV Fosters
- Foster Sharing Shed: Provide an area where fosters can access donated items to use that is self-accessible.

- **Retain Fosters**

- Thank them loud and often. Create a system for giving out recognition
- Offer condolences and support when necessary
- Develop relationships
- Encourage fosters to advocate for felv+
- Make it easy— They will keep coming back if it is easy.

### Finding and Supporting Adopters

Showing off your FeLV cats is vital. When an adopter comes in that has no other cats in the home, show them the FeLV! Share available FeLV+ cats often on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc. Facebook Live is a great tool to not only show off your adoptable cats but also discuss what FeLV+ means and why it's so important to adopt these cats first.

It's all in how we discuss FeLV with the adopters. These cats are not sick - they have a compromised immune system. Very similarly to a person who is immuno-compromised, they are no different in their day to day lives, and you wouldn't see a person and know they have a compromised immune system. But they are more susceptible to illness and if they get ill, it's important it's addressed quickly as it can progress faster in a FeLV. I try to explain to adopters that they have the same quality of life while they are and are equally deserving as any other cat and will be a wonderful addition to the family for the time they do have with them.

- Show adopters the FeLV+ cat first if they have no other cats in the home
- Educate and disclose to potential adopters all known medical implications of a cat testing positive for FeLV, including but not limited to potential for shortened lifespan and recommended directives for pet care.
  - Place FeLV+ cats into adoptive homes with only other FeLV+ cats or no other cats, until such a time as research directs a change in best practice. Similarly, APA! recommends FeLV+ cats remain indoors only.
- Do not charge an adoption fee for FeLV cats.
- Counsel adopters on the cat's medical history in detail and go over common signs of illness to watch out for. Remind adopters that FeLV cats need to be seen by a vet at the very first sign of illness as they get sick much faster than cats without FeLV.
- Provide the same resources and opportunities to viral positive cats that it would a viral negative cat, including equal medical care, equal opportunity for life, and equal opportunity for adoption.
- Partner with vets that have known experience and education on FeLV+ and recommend these vets during adoption counseling
- If possible, offer post-adoptive medical coverage, including antibiotics for common illnesses that FeLV+ cats, vet visits for FeLV+ related illness, palliative care for more serious / terminal illness, and end of life care, including euthanasia when necessary.
- Provide community, including an exclusive adopters group for FeLV adopters.
- Promptly answer any inquiries from adopters, including medical, behavioral, and any other questions or concerns

### **APA! FeLV+ Protocols and SOPS**

APA! Feline Leukemia Protocols, SOPs, etc available online which you can access here:

<https://americanpetsalive.org/resources>

(See Medical: FeLV.)

FeLV webinar which covers our adoption program in a bit more depth:

<https://university.maddiesfund.org/products/feline-leukemia-testing-one-and-done-for-everyone>

[APA! Feline Leukemia Adoption Information - For Adopters](#)

[APA! Feline Leukemia Foster Information - For Fosters](#)

[APA! Feline Leukemia Volunteer Information - For Volunteers](#)