

### ***Your cat just tested positive for Feline Leukemia... now what?***

Feline Leukemia Virus (*FeLV*) is a virus that affects the immune system of a cat. It isn't a form of cancer but a virus that 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 often have a shorter life expectancy than FeLV-negative cats.

Austin Pets Alive! debunks the myth and misconception that FeLV+ cats are sick or suffering and that these cats are unwanted or unadoptable. FeLV+ cats can have the same quality of life as a FeLV-negative cat and can recover from routine illness. FeLV+ cats are highly adoptable as well. APA's Feline Leukemia program has adopted thousands of viral-positive cats since its inception. In fact, our 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 give your kitty a happy life, or the steps to take if you plan to rehome him.

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## Where do I start?

If your cat (or a cat that you have taken in) has tested positive for Feline Leukemia, the first step is to ensure your cat *actually* has Feline Leukemia.

## Ask your vet what type and brand of test was used to diagnose!

Testing should only be performed on an IDEXX brand test at your veterinarian’s office. Due to other tests having a high rate of false positive test results, we only recommend **IDEXX brand SNAP tests** or the **IDEXX #26355 test**, as the latter is the most definitive FeLV test available. The #26355 test will perform 2 tests in one: (1) a lab-controlled ELISA test to rule out a focal infection, and (2) a qPCR. If your cat tests FeLV+ positive, it will give you the viral load (a measure of how much virus is in the cat), and classify the infection as *progressive* or *regressive* (regressively infected cats can live for many years as their immune system is keeping up with the virus). **If your DVM has used a different brand, we recommend having the cat retested using this test.**

If you live in the central Texas area, you can use [this map to find a veterinarian that uses IDEXX tests](#). While APA does not currently use any type of confirmatory tests (See our Webinar “[One and Done For Everyone](#)”), there are some options available:

<b>qPCR testing</b>	<b>IFA testing</b>
A PCR test detects the presence of proviral DNA, confirming an infection. A qPCR also provides numerical quantification of the FeLV proviral DNA (copies/mL), meaning that this test can identify a <i>progressive</i> or <i>regressive</i> infection.	An IFA test detects the presence of the p27 antigen in leukocytes. An IFA test will only show as <i>positive</i> if the infection has progressed into the bone marrow, where leukocytes originate. Therefore, <i>an IFA can only identify a progressive infection.</i>

## FeLV tests + FeLV variants

Getting an accurate FeLV test result is largely dependent on several factors:

1. **The brand of test that you use.** IDEXX tests are the most reliable and accurate brand available on the market (we usually get IDEXX SNAP ELISA tests for quick in-house results during intakes), whereas things like a Witness test are over 60% inaccurate.
2. **The age that you test the cats.** FeLV kittens can fluctuate their status and viral load up until 12 weeks of age, and can either retain or abort the virus at that age to become a FeLV+ or FeLV- adult. Any cat over the age of 12 weeks who is tested and is FeLV+ is more likely to actually be FeLV.
3. **The types of tests utilized.** While IDEXX snap tests can help with identifying if a cat is +/-, they don't account for situations like FeLV regressive or FeLV discordant cats--when the FeLV viral load can shift at any given time even after the cat is 12+ weeks old.
  1. **IFA tests** only work for *progressive* FeLV types (not regressive or discordant), because it detects the presence of the p27 antigen in leukocytes and will only show as positive if the infection has progressed into the bone marrow, where leukocytes originate.

2. **qPCR tests** detect the presence of proviral DNA--confirming an infection--and provides numerical quantification of the FeLV proviral DNA (copies/mL), so this test can identify either a *progressive* or *regressive* infection type.
3. **IDEXX #26355 tests** are the most definitive FeLV test available, and will perform 2 tests in one: (1) a lab-controlled ELISA test to rule out a focal infection, and (2) a qPCR. If your cat tests FeLV+ positive, it will give you the viral load (a measure of how much virus is in the cat), and classify the infection as *progressive* or *regressive* (regressively infected cats can live for many years as their immune system is keeping up with the virus).
4. **the type of FeLV status that a cat has:**
  1. Both discordant and regressive cats can still test FeLV+ at random times, and a lot of research is still being done to look into FeLV infection variants. [This is a great webinar](#) that helps explain how to handle discordant results. The general overview is:

<u>FeLV regressive</u>	FeLV discordant
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Strong immune response contains the infection</b></li> <li>• <b>Low viral count:</b> virus may be present in some cells, but the cat's immune response prevents widespread replication</li> <li>• May test negative on routine FeLV tests as the viral count is too low to detect the antigen</li> <li>• <b>PCR tests</b> will still be able to detect the virus (a lab test that detects the genetic material of the virus, <b>not the same as a qPCR test</b>)</li> <li>• <u>Can</u> become progressive and shed the virus sometimes</li> </ul> <p><b>1 (-) qPCR + 1 (+) IDEXX SNAP test</b></p> <p><b>= FeLV regressive</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Can change test results each time they are tested</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Stress can affect results</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Regressive and discordant variants are often closely associated and misdiagnosed as one another</li> <li>• Both discordant and regressive cats can still test FeLV+ at random times</li> <li>• A lot of research still being done on this variant</li> <li>• If they ever tested (+) on an IDEXX SNAP at any point, we'd consider them FeLV+</li> </ul> <p><b>1 (+) IDEXX SNAP (in-house) + 1 (-) IDEXX lab</b></p> <p><b>= FeLV+</b></p>

### Can I bring a FeLV+ cat into my home?

Any new cat should be quarantined from other cats in the household until testing is complete. This protects your existing pets from not only FeLV, but other communicable diseases. If the new cat is confirmed to be FeLV+, we recommend segregating from other FeLV negative adults, unless they have previously been vaccinated against Feline Leukemia. No vaccination is 100% effective, so whether to fully integrate a FeLV+ cat into a home with negative cats is a decision to be made between you and your private veterinarian.

A FeLV+ cat can reside in the same household if they have separate living areas. A spare bedroom, office, or bathroom is adequate to prevent transmission. You don't need to be concerned about hand-washing, having dedicated beds, toys, bowls, etc., as FeLV is spread mainly from queen to kitten, through mating, and through repeated and prolonged exchange of bodily fluids.

**FeLV regressive/discordant cats can live with other FeLV+ cats, but not other FeLV-** cats due to their ability to sometimes test positive. Once a cat has developed the antibodies from the FeLV antigen, they carry those antibodies for life, so exposure to a cat with a higher viral load (a more straightforward FeLV+ cat) can not give them "more FeLV" or cause additional illnesses. Since it is possible for these cats to become progressive and contagious in the future, we only adopt out FeLV regressive cats to homes with other FeLV+ cats or no other cats. Cats can actually go between regressive and progressive statuses (typically they don't go from progressive to regressive, though).

### Medical Information and Recommendations for Feline Leukemia

Feline Leukemia itself does not require any additional medical care, however, FeLV+ cats are more susceptible to 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).

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 recommend providing palliative care, which typically includes a medication like gabapentin to keep the cat comfortable and/or steroids.

For terminal illness, we recommend a blood test to check for anemia and/or x-rays of the chest to screen for cancer. Once a presumptive diagnosis is determined, supportive-care medications can be prescribed by your DVM based on symptoms.

Your DVM and/or specialists can additionally provide further diagnostics or treatments, if desired.

We recommend waiting until a cat is over 6 months old and has been in the home for over 2 weeks prior to spay or neuter.

FeLV+ cats should receive rabies and FVRCP vaccinations on the same schedule as a FeLV negative cat.

***When making end of life decisions, euthanasia should be used only if the cat is presenting with a terminal condition and suffering.***

### Rehoming a FeLV+ Cat

If you have confirmed the Feline Leukemia diagnosis and are unable to keep the cat yourself, rehoming him yourself or returning him to his community if he was found as a stray would be the next step.

As rehoming may take some time, it's important to first determine where the cat will reside until a home is found.

If this cat was already part of an established outdoor community, s/he should be spayed or neutered and returned to his community. If there is the concern of exposing other cats, exposure among community cats is primarily through mating and queen-to-kitten. The community has already been exposed, and through sterilization, the only potential introduction of the virus is minimal.

If releasing back to a known environment is not an option, you can safely keep the FeLV cat in a bathroom or separate room, without risk of exposing your resident FeLV negative cats, while helping him find his forever home.

Start by asking family members, friends, and others you may know through volunteering or other community activities.

Join and post on as social media groups within your community as possible. There are social media groups specifically for rehoming FeLV+ cats.

Collect as many marketing materials as possible– cute photos, videos, a biography with specific personality details, etc.

Post daily in social media groups looking for another foster or an adopter. Send out funny and unique pleas so that your kitty stands out from others. Stress the urgency of the cat finding an adopter and that an adopter would be a hero for adopting him. Make your adoption pleas clever and captivating, highlighting the cat's personality.

If you're in Texas, you can additionally post to our [PASS Facebook Page](#).

Contact all local shelters and ask if they can take custody of the cat with you as the foster until they are able to find another foster or an adopter. The shelter may be able to advertise him to a broader audience through their website and other resources.

### Additional Adoption Tips

**HOW YOU TALK TO POTENTIAL ADOPTERS MATTERS!** Instead of saying, “these cats are sick” (which they *aren’t!*), note that they have a compromised immune system and humanize the conversation around their needs as much as you can. Much like an immunocompromised person, they’re no different in their day-to-day lives. However, because they are more susceptible to illness, it’s important to address medical symptoms quickly, as illness can progress faster in a FeLV+ cat. Explain to adopters that FeLV+ cats have the same quality of life as any other cat, and are equally deserving of a home.

- Educate and disclose to potential adopters all known medical implications of a cat testing positive for FeLV, including (but not limited to) the likely potential for shortened lifespan and the recommended directives for pet care.
- Let potential adopters know what vets in the area specialize in FeLV cat care. Typically cat-specialized hospitals are a good place to start.
- The best placement option for a FeLV+ cat is a home 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 a FeLV cat.
- 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.

## TNR & FeLV+ Community Cats

### Should we test community cats for FeLV?

Guidelines released by **the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) advise against testing community cats for FeLV—including TNR programs**. Per the AAFP, “Although this document broadly recommends testing all cats for retroviral infection, an exception exists for feral cats in trap-neuter-return (TNR) programs. The prevalence of infection is similar in outdoor pet cats and feral cats; so feral cats do not present an increased threat to pets ([Levy et al 2006b](#)). Additionally, **neutering reduces two common modes of transmission:** queen to kitten for FeLV, and fighting among males for both FeLV and FIV ([Levy 2000](#), [Levy and Crawford 2005](#)). Because population control of feral cats requires commitment to neutering the largest number of cats possible, many TNR programs do not routinely test feral cats ([Wallace and Levy 2006](#)).”

The national average of FeLV infection in community cat colonies is 4.3%, which is similar to the percentage of owned cats with FeLV. Areas with a higher TNR presence tend to have a lower occurrence of FeLV+ cats. Additionally, many FeLV tests yield a high rate of false positive results. Due to the high cost of FeLV/FIV tests, program resources should be re-allocated to treating cats with *known* illness.

Cats from an established community should be spayed or neutered and returned to their community. **Once the found cat is altered, it can return back into the community**--whatever FeLV exposure is there is both minimal and already exists, so we aren't removing anything or “curing” the rest of the community, and we aren't introducing anything new when putting the cat back. The chance of repeated, prolonged exposure is so minimal among community cats due to inconsistent food sources and no litter box sharing, there is little concern of it going viral in the same way that a calici or panleuk outbreak would from mere contact.

The only time that we would say to contact a vet or rescue is if the cat is noticeably sick, injured, near death, pregnant, or otherwise in need of medical help. Otherwise, **there's zero reason to euthanize a cat that was existing just fine before it was discovered to have FeLV**, even if other areas and shelters practice that belief.

### What to do if a healthy community cat tests positive for FeLV?

Spay or neuter the cat and return them to their community. Exposure among community cats is primarily through mating and queen-to-kitten. The community has already been exposed, and through sterilization, the only potential introduction of the virus is minimal.

### What to do if a sick community cat tests positive for FeLV?

Provide the cat with appropriate veterinary care, spay or neuter the cat, and return them to their community. For resources or help, reach out to [felv@austinpetsalive.org](mailto:felv@austinpetsalive.org).

### For more information, visit:

[2020 AAFP Feline Retrovirus Testing and Management Guidelines](#). Little, S. et al 2020; Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery 22: 5-30  
[2020 AAFP Retrovirus Toolkit](#), published by IDEXX

**Euthanasia should only be the LAST RESORT and used only to relieve pain and suffering!**

## FeLV Myths & Facts

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

- **Fact:** Transmission of FeLV amongst often only infects 1-in-3 cats, and requires sharing bodily fluids via mating, from queen to kitten, or prolonged and repeated exposure between cats (via fluids from bowls, litter boxes, grooming, etc.).

### **Myth: FeLV is a cancer.**

- **Fact:** FeLV is a *retrovirus*, not a cancer. The actual name of the virus is a misnomer.

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

- **Fact:** While the virus weakens the immune system and leaves a 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. The easiest comparison is a person with allergies vs a person without: the person with allergies is immunocompromised and may deal with illness flare ups from things that don't affect the person without allergies, but they are not inherently sick and suffering—they just have a weaker immune system in the face of things that can trigger illness in them, and often need medication to successfully get over their symptoms.

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

- **Fact:** Cats should ***never*** be euthanized based upon a test result, especially because many tests are often wrong, only show exposure to the virus vs infection, and their results can change over time (*FeLV regressive, discordant, and abortive* cats are some examples). ***There is no singular or definitive test for FeLV that is 100% accurate.*** Furthermore, FeLV+ cats are just as deserving of life and can live happily, and there is zero reason to kill them just for having a different immune system from a non-FeLV.

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

- **Fact:** At APA!, our adoption fees for FeLV+ cats are waived and we provide lifelong medical care for all FeLV-related issues, 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 FeLV from the cat, or I may get it from the cat.**

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

### APA! FeLV+ Protocols and SOPS

- APA! FeLV Protocols, SOPs, etc. [available online](#) (search for "FeLV")
- [FeLV webinar](#) which covers our adoption program in-depth
- [APA! FeLV adoption packet \(2024 edition\)](#)
  - Includes information on:
    - spay/neuter age restrictions, common medical symptoms, Austin-local vets who treat FeLV patients, and more
- [APA! FeLV foster information \(2024 edition\)](#)
  - Includes information on:
    - how to monitor fear, anxiety, stress (FAS) levels, building a low-stress area for your foster, doing slow intros with other pets, FeLV dietary needs, enrichment activities, and more
- [APA! FeLV volunteer instructions](#)