

FeLV/FIV testing

The Edmonton Humane Society (EHS) subscribes to the Association of Shelter Veterinarian (ASV) Guidelines with respect to formulation of shelter practices and protocols. The ASV Position Statement on Retroviral testing (<https://www.sheltervet.org/assets/docs/position-statements/Retroviral%20PS%202020.pdf>) proscribes 'cats should be individually considered when assessing their risk of contracting, developing, and/or transmitting Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) and Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) . . . the decision to test for FeLV and/or FIV in the shelter should be based on current scientific knowledge, available shelter resources, impact on feline population health, and program goals. High-risk cats, including those entering group housing and those who are ill, should be tested.¹ For individually-housed, low-risk, healthy cats, shelters should carefully weigh disease transmission risk as well as financial and management implications of testing.

EHS discontinued the practice of blanket screening all cats for FeLV/FIV in 2017. The following information addresses the rationale behind this decision.

Historically, all kittens and cats in our care were tested for FeLV/FIV using an in-house lateral flow chromatography test. However, research has shown that less than 2.5% of the North American feline population test positive for either FeLV or FIV. Considering the low prevalence of these diseases, we considered whether routine testing for all cats was the best use of our resources. Every month, thousands of dollars are spent on testing, and this does not account for the time and staffing it takes to perform these tests. In addition, the results of these tests are often misunderstood.

The FIV test specifically measures antibody levels, meaning cats younger than 6 months of age may test positive if circulating maternal antibodies are present. For this reason, we have opted to remove testing for all cats less than 6 months of age as a positive result may only suggest that a repeat test is needed once the kitten is older. In addition, cats may test negative for FIV if they are tested within the incubation period of the disease, which can be anywhere from 2 weeks to 12 months. On average, cats in our care stay at the shelter between 2 and 3 weeks, with kittens staying for even shorter lengths of time. Therefore, if a negative test cannot be relied upon, it begs the question of whether or not testing is all that useful. With that being said, because FIV is primarily spread through bite wounds, any cats that enter the shelter having bite wounds or battlescars are tested, and all cats are tested prior to being moved into group housing.

The FeLV test primarily measures circulating antigen. The results of FeLV testing are much more complicated than for FIV, primarily due to the fact that there are various stages of infection and different forms of infection (progressive vs regressive). Testing is

also complicated by the ability of animals to fight off infection or develop a latent infection. Therefore, FeLV testing is really only accurate for a given moment in time. A negative result may mean that an animal has never been infected, or it could indicate an animal with a latent/cleared infection. It also does not guarantee that an animal will not develop FeLV-associated disease in the future. Similarly, a positive result does not indicate that a cat will be persistently infected and succumb to the effects of FeLV-associated disease. Repeat testing for both positive and negative patients is always recommended. In fact, we often found that cats who initially tested positive on in-house lateral flow immunoassays, would test negative on confirmatory ELISA tests. Cats were unnecessarily being held in isolation based on an unreliable test and funds were unnecessarily being allocated for further testing. In addition, because a single test does not give an accurate representation of FeLV status, we found it very difficult to counsel adopters regarding the results of this test.

In summary, EHS's policy for FeLV/FIV testing in cats is as follows:

- Testing is performed on any at-risk cats, including those with obvious fight wounds and those from hoarding situations.
- Testing is performed on cats displaying signs of illness within the symptomatic or laboratory diagnostic spectrum of retroviral disease.
- Testing is NOT performed on cats under 6 months of age.
- Testing is NOT performed on healthy adult cats that are housed individually