



Providing rescue programs and services to animals and those who care for them.

Position Statement on Testing for FeLV and FIV in Shelter Cats

UAF has joined other shelters and feline welfare organizations across the country that have discontinued the practice of mass testing for feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV).

Testing is not a 100% accurate measure for screening FeLV and FIV and places an undue burden on both the health of the cats and kittens in the shelter and the resources available to the shelter and the community. A low percentage of cats test positive and there is a high rate of false positive results in visibly healthy kittens. In addition, a low percentage of cats that are diagnosed as positive with FIV go on to develop symptoms.

From the UC Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program's resource sheet regarding FeLV:

"The blood test itself is quite accurate, but not perfect. Because cats can be transiently infected, it is possible that a cat will initially test positive for FeLV and then recover and test negative a later date. This is especially likely to occur in otherwise healthy kittens. In most healthy cat populations FeLV is quite uncommon, and this leads to an increase in the relative number of false positive results. In some studies, over half of FeLV positive results obtained by veterinary hospitals from healthy cats were incorrect.

Additionally in the case of FIV, again from the UC Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program's resource sheet on FIV:

"Although transmission to kittens at or near the time of birth has been experimentally reported, in nature this appears to be extremely uncommon. Kittens born to FIV positive mothers are at low risk for infection, although they may initially test positive due to the presence of maternal antibodies...

...The blood test is quite accurate, but false positives and occasionally false negatives do occur. In healthy, low-risk populations FIV is quite uncommon, and this leads to an increase in the relative number of false positive results. The blood test may also falsely identify recently infected cats as negative. To be absolutely certain, cats must be tested 1-3 months after their last known exposure. The test cannot be accurately interpreted in young kittens...

...Maternal antibodies may interfere with FIV testing in kittens. The literature is in disagreement as to when FIV screening may be performed: maternal antibody interference can rarely occur up to 4 months but has disappeared by 6 months. As mentioned, even in adult cats, infection may take up to 1-3 months to develop, so a final test should be performed 3 months after the last known exposure to be absolutely certain."

The Oregon Humane Society outlined the drawbacks of this type of testing:

"Testing every cat increased the time a cat spent in the shelter's holding kennel: Drawing blood and performing a feline leukemia test on an average of 30 to 50 cats per day took two employees up to four hours to complete and document. Less than one percent of the cats were testing positive.

Testing caused an enormous delay in getting cats out for adoption, making them more susceptible to illness (such as upper respiratory infection or URI). The staff time, low rate of positive results, and the cost of medical supplies (test kits, needles, and syringes was \$25,000 annually) were important factors in this decision.

Holding cats while they are awaiting the test made them more susceptible to illness: Most important in the decision to cease testing every cat was testing interfered with getting cats and kittens placed for adoption in a timely manner. During our busy season, with about 50 cats/kittens coming into the shelter daily, performing the tests slowed down the process of moving cats from the holding kennels to the adoption kennels. Cats would become ill with URI after 7 to 10 days in the shelter.

Many sick cats remained in our shelter for treatment, were put into foster homes, or unfortunately euthanized for this treatable illness (URI), not for feline leukemia. The best way we can protect our cats is to get them through the system and quickly into a loving home. Since implementation, OHS's adoption rate on cats has increased significantly.

OHS's goal is to find homes for unwanted animals while keeping them as healthy as possible while they are in the shelter. Since April 2001 when testing on every cat ceased, OHS experienced a surge in adoptions of cats and significant reduction in euthanasia."

The Animal Welfare Association in New Jersey stopped mass testing after they determined that less than 1% of the cats entering the shelter were testing positive and as many as half of those who did test positive would test negative when further testing was done in a laboratory setting.

The Animal Protective League of Cleveland joined others when they ended the practice of testing kittens for feline leukemia in 2006. Their statistics showed that only 1.5% of the more than 5,000 cats and kittens that entered the shelter annually were positive for FeLV. Routine testing was discontinued because of the stress on cats and kittens making them more vulnerable to upper respiratory disease. Additionally, this shelter found that cats could test negative but still be harboring the virus.

As the long-term objective of our organization is to save lives, we are clearly duty-bound to dedicate these resources to where they can touch the lives of the greatest number of animals in the most significant manner possible. After careful consideration and review, United Animal Friends has adopted this policy regarding FeLV and FIV testing. This policy is in line with our mission to save lives, maximizing lifesaving by utilizing our resources in a manner that best serves the entire population of animals within our community.