

Busting the Myths of FIV and FeLV

Few who knew Coo would describe his life as anything other than content. For more than 13 years, Coo, one of Alley Cat Allies' most beloved office cats, enhanced our lives by insisting we love him back—in the form of regular treats and snuggles. He even played the part of shy boyfriend with another special cat, Diana, who demanded his affection with the utmost determination. Coo was FIV-positive. Like all viruses, feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukemia virus (FeLV) are incurable and surrounded by misunderstanding. While the viruses are in different subfamilies and affect feline health differently, both viruses are relatively uncommon. Available data indicate that approximately 2 to 4 percent of cats are infected with FIV and 4 to 5 percent of cats are infected with FeLV. Humans can never catch these feline viruses. And once cats are neutered, the viruses are much less transferable, because the primary modes of transmission, fighting and reproduction, are eliminated. Coo lived among other cats for years, yet none ever became infected. Diagnosing cats with these diseases can be challenging. Tests for both viruses can be unreliable and result in false positives. Kittens under six months of age must be re-tested later since kittens carry their mother's antibodies. And FIV tests, in particular, do not differentiate between FIV infection and FIV vaccination. Yet sadly, cats are sometimes killed because people misunderstand these viruses, how a cat is tested and what the test result indicates. A positive test result does not mean "destined to suffer." And many cats, like Coo, can remain healthy their entire lives. That's why Alley Cat Allies does not support killing cats simply because of a positive test result. Not only is it unnecessary, it's inhumane. Interestingly, feral cats are no more likely to be infected than their household peers. Alley Cat Allies discourages routine FIV or FeLV testing as part of a Trap-Neuter-Return program. Because of all these factors, veterinary experts agree that financial resources are much better spent on neutering than testing hundreds of cats in order to identify a handful that may never even develop viral-related disease. And as with all outdoor cats, neutering is the most effective way to inhibit the spread of the viruses. In fact, a study by Dr. Julie Levy, Alley Cat Allies' Scientific Advisor, demonstrated that disease prevalence was reduced more by focusing resources on neuter surgeries than by testing and removing FeLV-positive cats.

www.alleycat.org/FIVandFeLV