

Dear Dr. Wise. Should I have my cat vaccinated against Feline Leukemia?

It depends. Not all cats need to be vaccinated against Feline Leukemia virus since not all cats are at risk of contracting the disease. You need to vaccinate your cat if it is at high risk of prolonged contact with other infected cats. If your cat is an indoor/outdoor cat who spends most of its time indoors or a strictly indoor cat the vaccine is not needed. Cats that are mostly outdoors or housed with Feline Leukemia Virus positive cats need to be vaccinated for their risk of prolonged contact with an infected cat is high. I recommend you approach your veterinarian with your specific case to assess the level of risk of your cat to contract the disease.

The virus is transmitted via prolonged close contact with infected cats, through the saliva. Transmission occurs when cats fight, groom each other, or come in contact with urine or feces. Other ways your cat can contract the virus is through contaminated blood transfusions. This last however is uncommon since most blood donor cats are screened for the disease.

To minimize the chance of contracting Feline Leukemia your cat is best to be kept indoors and away from infected cats. To avoid introducing infected cats in your household I recommend testing every new cat before introducing it to the rest of the household cats. To decrease the chances of transmission the incoming cat should be placed in isolation in your home for a period of 3 months after the first negative test result. A second test should be performed to assure the cat is free from the virus as dormancy of the virus is not uncommon. Consult with your veterinarian if you are to introduce a new cat into your home for further instructions.

Vaccinations are not 100% effective since there are many strains and vaccines vary in effectiveness depending on each animal. Consider the vaccines efficacy to be less than for other diseases.

In conclusion if your cat is not at high risk you do not have to vaccinate for Feline Leukemia Virus. Follow the recommendations given in here to avoid the virus from coming into your home and to reduce the risk of your feline friend.

Sources:

Nelson and Cuoto, Small Animal Internal Medicine, Mosby 2003

Sturgess, Notes on Feline Internal Medicine, Blackwell Publishing 2003