

Testing for FeLV/FIV

Testing for viral diseases such as feline leukemia (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) in feral cat colonies should be optional and not mandatory. Funds for sterilization programs are usually limited, so resources may be better spent on sterilization and rabies vaccines rather than on testing. Alley Cat Rescue does not perform testing as part of our standard TNR program; however, all cats who are placed into our adoption program or feral cats who are relocated to barn homes are tested.

The occurrence of FeLV and FIV and the rate of transmission of these diseases in feral cats is very low. Large epidemiologic studies “indicate FeLV and FIV are present in approximately 4% of feral cats, which is not substantially different from the infection rate reported for pet cats” (Levy and Crawford, 2004). Models of the transmission of the two diseases among feral cat populations “indicate that neither virus impacts overall colony size,” meaning these viruses are not quickly killing infected cats, but rather cats are capable of living years with either disease (Levy and Crawford, 2004).

FeLV is primarily spread from infected mother cats to their kittens, and FIV is mostly spread among fighting tomcats through deep bite wounds. Spaying and neutering will decrease these activities and the spread of these infections. Studies have shown that “FeLV and FIV may become extinct” in cat populations with “few aggressive interactions” (Levy and Crawford, 2004).

Furthermore, mass screenings of healthy cats can result in large numbers of *false* positives. All cats testing positive should be retested to properly confirm diagnosis, which is usually not possible in the case of feral cats, due to limited resources.

Operation Catnip’s founder, Dr. Julie Levy, points out that the greatest cause of feline deaths in the United States is the killing — by humans — of unwanted stray and feral cats, which causes more deaths than all feline infectious diseases combined (Levy and Crawford, 2004). Subsequently, most TNR programs choose to focus their efforts and resources on sterilization and vaccination rather than testing.

Reference

Levy, Julie K., and P. Cynda Crawford. “Humane Strategies for Controlling Feral Cat Populations.” *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 225.9 (2004): 1354–60. Avmajournals.avma.org (Atypon). Web. 18 Aug. 2014.