

Feline Upper Respiratory Infection



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The symptoms are fairly simple: sneezing, nasal discharge, runny eyes, cough, oral ulcers, hoarse voice, or any combination thereof.

The chief infectious agents that cause feline upper respiratory infections are: herpesvirus and calicivirus, together accounting for about 90% of infections.

Other agents include: *Chlamydomphila*, *Mycoplasma*, *Bordetella*, and others. Of course, a cat or kitten may be infected with more than one agent.

Viruses are spread by the wet sneezes on infected or carrier individuals. The herpesvirus is very fragile, surviving only 18 hours outside its host; calicivirus is tougher, lasting up to 10 days. Bleach will readily inactivate either virus but calici is able to withstand unbleached laundry detergents.

Most feline colds run a course of 7 to 10 days regardless of treatment but it is important to realize that these infections are permanent and that herpesvirus infections are recurring (a property of all types of herpes infections). In kittens herpes infections are notorious for dragging out. Stresses such as surgery (usually neutering/spaying), boarding, or introduction of a new feline companion commonly induce a fresh herpes upper respiratory episode about a week following the stressful event with active virus shedding for another couple of weeks. These episodes may recur for the life of the cat though as the cat matures, symptoms become less and less severe and ultimately may not be noticeable to the owner. Cats infected with calici may shed virus continuously, not just in times of stress, and may do so for life, though about 50% of infected cats seem to stop shedding virus at some point.

A cat with herpes is contagious to other cats for a couple of weeks after a stressful event. Cats infected with calici are contagious for several months after infection but do not appear to have recurrences the same way cats with herpes do.

Signs a Cat Requires Hospitalization

- **Loss of Appetite**
- **Congestion with open mouth breathing**
- **High fever or the extreme listlessness that implies a high fever (if one cannot take the cat's temperature.)**

A cold for a cat is usually just a nuisance as a cold usually is for one of us. Sometimes though an upper respiratory infection can be serious. If a cat is sick enough to stop eating or drinking, hospitalization may be needed to support him or her through the brunt of the infection. A cat (usually a kitten) can actually get dehydrated from the fluid lost in nasal discharge. Painful ulcers can form on the eyes, nose or in the mouth. Sometimes fever is high enough to warrant monitoring. In young kittens, pneumonia may result from what started as an upper respiratory infection.

If you think your cat or kitten is significantly uncomfortable with a cold you should seek veterinary assistance with an office visit.

How Is This Usually Treated?

Since 90% of cases are viral in origin and we have no antibiotics against viruses, it seems odd that feline upper respiratory infections are frequently treated with anti-bacterial medications. The reason for this is that it is common for these viral infections to become complicated by secondary bacterial invaders. The **antibiotics** act on these. Further, the next most common infectious agents (after herpes and calici) are ***Chlamydomphila felis*** (formerly known as ***Chlamydia psittaci***) and ***Bordetella bronchiseptica***, both organisms being sensitive to the **tetracycline** family (such as doxycycline). For this reason, when antibiotics are selected, tetracyclines and their relatives are frequently chosen. (Since tetracycline use can permanently stain the teeth of immature animals, these medications are generally not chosen for younger pets.) Oral medications, and/or eye ointments are commonly prescribed.

For congestion, some human nose drop products can be used for relief. Consult your veterinarian before attempting any sort of home treatment. Other therapies frequently employed include low doses of interferon-alpha (to generally stimulate the immune system) and oral lysine supplementation (which interferes with herpesvirus reproduction).

For younger kittens that are infected, often the most significant factor in their throwing off infection is maturation and gaining a more effective immune system with growth.

Occasionally infections can lead to more chronic symptoms

For Further Symptomatic Relief:

If your cat is extremely congested or "sniffly," Little Noses nose drops with phenylephrine may be purchased over the counter at any pharmacy. One drop twice daily in the cat's nose is helpful. Eye ointments may also be helpful for cats with associated conjunctivitis.



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