

Feline Upper Airway Infections

- Cats, especially kittens, often get upper airway infections.
- Approximately 90% of all upper airway infections in cats are caused by two common viruses: feline herpesvirus-1 and feline calicivirus.
- Depending on their cause, upper airway infections can quickly become serious, especially in kittens. If your cat shows any signs of respiratory illness, make an appointment with your veterinarian right away.
- Treatment typically consists mostly of keeping your cat warm, comfortable, and eating and drinking properly.
- Feline herpesvirus-1 and feline calicivirus vaccines are considered “core,” meaning that they should be given to virtually every cat.

What Are Upper Airway Infections?

Upper airway infections in cats often resemble the common cold in people. Cats, especially kittens, often get upper airway infections. If your cat shows any signs of respiratory illness, such as sneezing, wheezing, or discharge from the eyes or nose (*see box*), make an appointment with your veterinarian right away. Depending on their cause, upper airway infections can quickly become serious, especially in kittens. In adult cats, untreated infections can lead to other (secondary) infections or damage delicate sinuses, resulting in chronic problems.

Approximately 90% of all upper airway infections in cats are caused by two common viruses: feline herpesvirus-1 and feline calicivirus. Feline herpesvirus is related to the virus that causes cold sores and chickenpox in people; however, people cannot get sick from the feline virus. Upper airway infections in cats can also be caused by fungi or bacteria. It is common for cats to be “co-infected”—infected with more than one agent (e.g., a virus and a bacterium) at the same time—which can make treatment and recovery longer and more difficult.

Signs of upper respiratory disease can also be linked to other serious problems, like allergies,

dental disease, cancer, or the presence of a foreign object in the nose or the back of the mouth.

How Are These Diseases Spread?

Feline upper airway infections are spread the same way as the common cold: a healthy cat comes into contact with an object that has been used by an infected cat—for example, a shared food bowl or toy. Frequently disinfecting shared items can help reduce transmission risk. Feline calicivirus can also be spread when a healthy cat uses the same litter-box as an infected cat. And, just like the common cold, your hands can play a role in spreading these viruses, so if you have or touch a sick cat, wash your hands before touching another cat!

Even after they are no longer sick, many cats that have been infected with feline herpesvirus and calicivirus can transmit these viruses to other cats. Therefore, seek professional veterinary advice before introducing a new cat with an unknown vaccination history into your house or before placing your cat in an unfamiliar setting with other cats, such as a boarding facility.

Signs of Upper Airway Infections

Signs of upper airway tract disease in cats depend on what is causing them. The most common ones are:

- Sneezing
- Watery or mucous discharge from the eyes or nose
- Cough
- Fever
- Lethargy
- Loss of appetite or weight

Less common signs include:

- Hoarse or weak “voice”
- Change in face shape
- Ulcers in the mouth or eyes

Common Conditions

Diagnosis and Treatment

Diagnosing the exact cause of an upper airway infection can be difficult; however, your veterinarian will perform a thorough physical examination and may perform additional tests such as blood tests and radiography (obtaining x-rays). When you take your cat to the veterinary office, it helps if you can remember what vaccinations your cat has had, when your cat might have been exposed to an infected cat, and when your cat began to show signs of being sick. Also, if your cat's illness lasts an unusually long time or is accompanied by unusual pain, facial deformity, significant weight loss, or some other odd sign, additional diagnostic tests may be needed to rule out other problems.

As in people, very few drugs can control viral infections, so treatment typically consists mostly of keeping your cat warm, comfortable, and eating and drinking properly. Many sick cats lose their appetite because nasal congestion affects their sense of smell, so these cats may need to be tempted with warmed, moist cat food, baby food, or another delicious treat. Discharge from the nose and eyes should be gently cleared away if the cat will allow it, and any lesions in the mouth or eyes should be treated. You may be given a prescription for a broad-spectrum antibiotic to help combat any secondary bacterial infections. Dehydration can be a problem in seriously ill cats, so fluid therapy may be needed in some cases.

Prevention

Cats that are kept indoors are at a lower risk of contracting upper airway diseases. Cats that are

allowed outside; have recently been in a shelter, boarding facility, or cattery; or live in a multicat household are at higher risk of contracting these diseases. Kittens, because of their immature immune systems, are also at higher risk.

Vaccines are available to help prevent or reduce the severity of the most common infections. Many vaccines may not be 100% effective in preventing

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a disease, but they do help limit how sick your cat becomes if he or she is infected. The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP; www.catvets.com) considers feline herpesvirus-1 and feline calicivirus vaccines as “core,” meaning that they should be given to virtually every cat. They are usually given in a single combination vaccine. The current AAFP recommendations include vaccinating kittens as young as 6 weeks, accompanied by a series of booster shots. The number of boosters depends on the kitten's age when the first shot is given. Consult your veterinarian about the best vaccination schedule for your individual cat.