

Physical Examination and Feline Distemper Combination Vaccine

- Cats often hide their illnesses, so physical examination by your veterinarian can help determine if your cat is sick.
- Regular physical examinations by your veterinarian are recommended for your cat.
- Feline distemper and feline infectious respiratory disease can cause serious illness in cats and can sometimes be fatal.
- Cats that go outside are at increased risk for exposure to feline distemper and infectious respiratory disease.
- The feline distemper combo vaccination can help to prevent disease associated with feline distemper and feline infectious respiratory disease.

Why Does My Cat Need a Physical Examination?

A thorough physical examination by a veterinarian is an important part of routine wellness care for all cats. Cats are very good at hiding their illnesses, so a physical examination may be the only way to determine if your cat is as healthy as he or she seems to be. Even if your cat seems fine and has no evidence of problems, routine physical examinations are important for establishing “normal” values for your cat. For example, subtle changes in weight may be detected only by comparing your cat’s current weight with readings from previous examinations.

What Happens During a Physical Examination?

A routine physical examination begins by obtaining a medical history from you. Because you observe your cat regularly, your responses to medical history questions provide critical information about your cat’s health. Among other things, your veterinary team may ask questions about your cat’s appetite, litterbox usage, and activity level. You should mention any changes in your cat’s lifestyle, diet, or regular routine.

During physical examination, your veterinarian will observe your cat’s overall appearance. Haircoat, skin condition, overall body condition, and overall

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attitude can change when a cat is ill. Your cat’s weight and vital statistics (temperature, pulse, and respiration) will also be checked. Other parts of a physical examination may include the following:

- Checking the fur for evidence of fleas, ticks, or other skin parasites
- Examining the eyes and ears
- Briefly examining the gums and teeth (a full dental exam requires sedation)
- Listening to the heart and lungs with a stethoscope to check heart rate/rhythm and lung sounds
- Palpating (feeling) the abdominal organs

Even if a physical examination is very thorough, some medical conditions are not apparent just from physical examination. Your veterinarian may recommend diagnostic testing to screen for other problems. For example, a stool specimen can be used to check for intestinal parasites, and blood tests can help detect infections or other medical problems. Your veterinarian may also recommend wellness blood work to help determine whether your cat’s major organs are functioning properly.

Depending on which vaccinations your cat receives, these injections are routinely given during physical examination visits.

What Is a Feline Distemper Combo Vaccine?

The feline distemper combination, or combo, vaccine is formulated to protect cats from several diseases through a single injection. Many types of combo vaccines are available, some protecting against up to five diseases. Without combo vaccinations, cats would need to receive a separate injection against each disease. The most commonly used combo vaccines protect cats from disease associated with feline viral rhinotracheitis, feline calicivirus, feline panleukopenia (distemper), and feline chlamydiosis (or pneumonitis). The abbreviations for these diseases indicate which components are in the combo vaccine: *FVRCP* stands for feline viral rhinotracheitis (FVR), calicivirus (C), and panleukopenia (P). For vaccines that also protect against chlamydiosis, the initials are *FVRCP-C*.

What Diseases Does the Feline Distemper Combo Vaccine Protect My Cat From?

Although protection against many viruses (including rabies and feline leukemia viruses) can be included in a feline distemper combo vaccination, protection against the following is most common: feline viral rhinotracheitis, calicivirus infection, panleukopenia, and chlamydiosis. Most cats are not unlucky enough to become infected with all of these viruses at the same time. However, because the clinical signs "associated with some of these diseases can overlap and because treatment also tends to be similar, these infections are commonly considered as a group. Alone or in combination, almost all of the viruses mentioned here can be associated with respiratory clinical signs. This collection of clinical signs is commonly called *feline infectious respiratory disease* or *feline upper respiratory infection*. The exception to this grouping is panleukopenia (feline distemper), which is a potentially fatal condition that can cause severe vomiting and diarrhea as well as high fever.

How Do Cats Become Infected With These Diseases?

Most of the viruses associated with feline infectious respiratory disease do not live for a very long time in the environment, so contact with a sick cat often spreads the infection. In addition, cats with feline

infectious respiratory disease tend to sneeze and cough, and contact with these droplets can also spread the infection. Studies have shown that respiratory droplets and mucus that are expelled during sneezing can spread the viruses up to 6 feet away! Another cat in the same room or close by is at risk for becoming infected.

Panleukopenia (feline distemper) is different from the respiratory viruses. Once a cat is infected with panleukopenia, it can shed virus in body fluids (most notably urine and feces) for up to 6 weeks. If another cat encounters an infected cat (or its body fluids) during this time, transmission is likely. However, the feline panleukopenia virus can also live in the environment and on contaminated bedding and other items for a very long time, so contact with contaminated objects can also spread the infection.

Cats that go outside are at increased risk for exposure to feline distemper and infectious respiratory disease.

What Are the Signs of These Diseases?

The clinical signs associated with feline infectious respiratory disease depend on several factors, including the viruses involved and the overall age and health of the cat. Kittens tend to develop more severe illness, as do cats that were unhealthy before they became infected. Clinical signs can include the following:

- Fever
- Lethargy (tiredness) and depression
- Discharge from the nose and eyes
- Coughing and/or sneezing
- Conjunctivitis (inflammation of the inner eyelids and tissues around the eyes)
- Ulcers in the mouth (tongue, lips, gums)
- Ulcers on the nose
- Drooling (if ulcers are in the mouth)
- Loss of appetite
- Pneumonia

Unlike the respiratory viruses, panleukopenia (feline distemper) attacks the intestinal tract, so

clinical signs are likely to include vomiting, diarrhea, fever, and dehydration. However, this virus also attacks the immune system, greatly reducing the number of white blood cells in the circulation. Your cat's body needs white blood cells to help fight off infection, so cats with panleukopenia tend to develop severe infections involving the intestines. These infections can quickly overwhelm the body's defenses, causing death.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Although sophisticated blood testing can diagnose feline infectious respiratory disease, most veterinarians make the diagnosis based on clinical signs. There is no specific treatment to eliminate these infections. Therefore, treatment is generally aimed at improving the clinical signs. Antibiotics, fluids, eye drops, and other supportive treatments are generally used.

Sophisticated testing of blood and body fluids can also be used to diagnose panleukopenia, but many veterinarians diagnose feline distemper based on clinical signs and the presence of a severely low white blood cell count. Treatment is mainly supportive and consists of administering fluids to prevent dehydration, antibiotics to treat infections, and other medications to help control vomiting and other clinical signs.

Vaccination and Prevention of Feline Distemper and Feline Infectious Respiratory Disease

Several vaccines are available for preventing disease associated with rhinotracheitis, calicivirus, panleukopenia, and chlamydiosis. All of the available FVRCP and FVRCP-C vaccines have been tested and found to be safe and effective when administered as directed.

Depending on which vaccine is used, kittens generally receive their first FVRCP vaccination around 8 to 9 weeks of age. A booster vaccination is given 3 to 4 weeks later, followed by boosters every 1 to 3 years (depending on exposure risk). Cats that go outside or live with other cats are at greater risk for exposure to these diseases compared with cats that stay indoors and have limited contact with other cats. Ask your veterinarian about how to protect your cat from feline distemper and feline respiratory virus infection.

Most of the feline infectious respiratory viruses are killed by routine disinfectants and do not live in the environment for more than a week. However, panleukopenia (feline distemper) is harder to kill. Cleaning the environment with a dilute bleach solution will kill the virus, which can otherwise live on surfaces for up to 2 years and is resistant to many other cleaning products and disinfectants. Be sure to wash hands and change clothes after handling an infected cat. Similarly, bowls, blankets, towels, toys, litterboxes, and other items should be cleaned with bleach (if possible) to reduce the risk of further disease spread.

Because feline distemper and feline infectious respiratory disease viruses are transmitted through contact, keeping sick cats separated from healthy cats can reduce the likelihood of transmission. Any new kitten or cat being introduced into the home should be examined by a veterinarian as soon as possible and separated from all other household pets for a quarantine period of at least a few weeks. During that time, the new cat should be monitored closely for any signs of illness. Any problems should be reported to your veterinarian before introducing the new cat to your other pets.