



Upper Respiratory Infections in Cats

What is an Upper Respiratory Infection?



Feline Herpes Virus type 1 and Calicivirus are the most common causes of upper respiratory infections in cats. Cats are most often exposed to these viruses at a young age or in a shelter situation. As many kittens live in shelters or foster situations before going to their new homes, this makes upper respiratory infections a common occurrence. Sometimes these viral infections can be complicated by secondary bacterial infections as well.

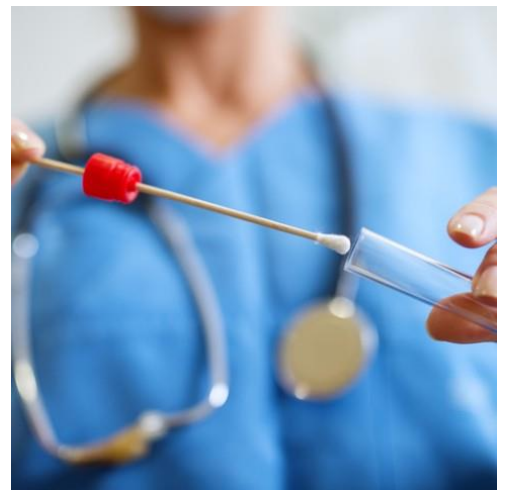
What are the clinical signs or symptoms of upper respiratory infections?

Many cats will show signs of sneezing or coughing, while others have clear nasal discharge and congestion. Ulcers in the mouth may develop, which can cause pain when eating. Clear ocular discharge, redness around the eyes and squinting may also be noticed. Severity of these clinical signs can be quite variable. In some cases, corneal ulcers may develop (scratches of the cornea). Cats may appear to be excessively squinting, pawing at their eye and may have copious eye discharge if a corneal ulcer has occurred.

How are upper respiratory infections diagnosed in cats?

In order to confirm a diagnosis of Herpes virus or Calicivirus in your cat, a swab of the back or their throat is taken. At the laboratory, the swab is analyzed for the viruses using a PCR technique (Polymerase Chain Reaction), where virus DNA is amplified and sequenced. This is a very specific test in that a positive test is confirmatory of the virus however not all infected cats will test positive (sensitivity is not 100%)

Very commonly, a presumptive diagnosis of upper respiratory infection is made based on history, clinical signs and response to therapy.





How are upper respiratory infections treated?

As these infections are caused by viruses, antibiotics are not indicated in the vast majority of cases. Most otherwise healthy cats will start feeling better within 7 to 10 days with rest alone as their immune system fights the virus. Unfortunately, even after recovery, feline herpes virus will remain latent in the cat and can re-emerge during future episodes of stress or other illness.

L-lysine supplements have been used to help reduce the severity and frequency of outbreaks, though studies have not proven their efficacy.

Probiotics have more recently been tried to reduce outbreaks with some success noted.

Cats with congestion will benefit from steam therapy as it can help clear their nasal passages. This can be achieved by having them stay in the bathroom with door closed while the shower is running.

Encouraging water intake and eating can be done by warming food with water and trying aromatic meals. If a corneal ulcer or conjunctivitis is diagnosed, eye medications will be prescribed to help discomfort and irritation while the eye heals.



Occasionally a case may become more complicated and a secondary bacterial infection will occur. This may be seen as green or yellow nasal discharge, wet, productive coughing, reduced appetite, lethargy and fever. These cats should be examined by a veterinarian and may require antibiotics. Severe cases may need hospitalization for supportive care and in some cases antiviral medications.

My cat has been diagnosed with an upper respiratory infection, should I continue to vaccinate my cat against this condition?

Vaccinating against Herpes virus or Calicivirus will not fight against the virus if it is already acquired, however, if only one of the viruses is affecting the cat, the vaccine will protect against the other virus that cause upper respiratory infections, therefore lessening the clinical signs of the disease. It will remain important to continue vaccinating your cat against





other feline diseases such as panleukopenia, feline leukemia virus and rabies as cats which are infected with upper respiratory infections may have a compromised immune system and may be at increased risk of acquiring other diseases.

I want to bring home a new cat, how should I protect them from acquiring an upper respiratory infection from my other cat?



Vaccinations should be given about one week prior to introduction with the infected cat. This may mean not bringing the cat home right away or at the very least keeping them separate. As kittens, vaccines against these viruses are given around 8 weeks, 12 weeks and 16 weeks to 20 weeks of age, then again one year later. It will be important to continue with the recommended vaccine protocol while these cats remain housemates.

Is this contagious for humans?

No. Feline upper respiratory infections are not zoonotic, meaning that they are only contagious to other naïve cats, not humans

What is the prognosis for my cat with upper respiratory infection?

The prognosis is good. Your cat will remain infected with the virus for life, but may not always be actively showing signs of infection. At times of stress, such as a new addition to the household or another illness in your cat, clinical signs of upper respiratory infection may show again. During this time, they will shed the virus which can infect other cats.