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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT FELINE UPPER RESPIRATORY INFECTIONS

What are the common symptoms of an upper respiratory infection (URI)?

- frequent **sneezing** which usually begins with a clear, watery nasal discharge but that may become thick and greenish or yellow in color
- **runny eyes** that may be red and swollen, squinting
- nasal **congestion**, producing “snorting” noises and causing some cats to hold their mouths open to breathe
- **fever** which results in lethargy and poor appetite
- signs of a **sore throat**, including gulping, swallowing frequently, drooling, and reluctance to eat

Sound familiar?

That is because cats experience many of the same symptoms that we do when we have a cold. By understanding the similarities, the approach we take to treating this common (and usually non-life-threatening) ailment will make sense.

What causes most URIs?

Most are the result of infection with a virus. Like humans, there are many viruses that can cause upper respiratory disease. Some are constantly changing and new every season (these are the *rhinoviruses*). Some are constantly present in the cat population, including *herpesvirus* and *calicivirus*. Although most cases are not initiated by a bacterial infection, rare cases are caused by *Chlamydia*, *Bordetella*, and *Mycoplasma*.

Which cats are at risk for URIs?

Any cat can acquire an upper respiratory infection, even if it is indoors only. This is because many upper respiratory viruses are quite sturdy and can be carried inside from the outside environment, especially if the owner comes in contact with cats outside the home. Cats that are not adequately vaccinated may be more likely to acquire herpesvirus (also known as “viral rhinotracheitis”, or the “VR” in the FVRCP vaccine) or calicivirus (the “C” in FVRCP).

Without a doubt, kittens are most commonly affected by upper respiratory infections. In fact, 85% of kittens are exposed to herpes and calicivirus before they are weaned. They are often kept together with many other cats (especially in shelters), may not have a fully developed immune system, may have had inadequate transfer of maternal antibodies, or may be weakened by other conditions such as malnutrition or intestinal parasites. However, as with children, even completely healthy kittens may acquire an infection.

Other cats at increased risk of URIs include breeds with shallow facial conformation (such as Persians), cats infected with feline leukemia or immunodeficiency virus, cats exposed to many other cats, and those with other diseases such as kidney failure, diabetes, and cancer.

How is a URI best treated?

In many cases, no specific medical treatment (ie, medication) is necessary. However, supportive care of any sick cat is paramount to a speedy recovery. Supportive care consists of:

- 1) adequate nutritional support
- 2) correction and prevention of dehydration
- 3) rest
- 4) relief of symptoms when possible

If there is an indication that a bacterial infection is contributing to the illness (usually characterized by lethargy, poor appetite, green or yellow discharge, or fever), we will prescribe antibiotics. However, as with humans, we would like to avoid use of antibiotics (which only kill bacteria, and not viruses) in uncomplicated viral infections.

Successful treatment of a URI therefore involves:

- offering palatable food (canned food is easier for a congested cat to smell) and syringe-feeding if the cat will not eat voluntarily
- fresh, clean water available; subcutaneous fluid injections if dehydrated
- keeping your cat indoors in a warm, protected environment
- humidifying the environment (a steamy bathroom or humidifier)
- keeping the nostrils and eyes clear of thick secretions by gentle cleaning
- administering medications as prescribed (if indicated)

How long will it take until my cat is well?

Symptoms of a URI can last from 4-14 days. Sneezing is the symptom which often lingers the longest, sometimes not disappearing until 3-4 weeks after infection. However, if symptoms are not improving after 10-14 days, make an appointment to have your cat re-evaluated. Your cat may have something more complicated than a routine URI.

My cat has continual bouts of runny eyes and/or sneezing - what causes this?

The most common cause of intermittent and chronic (long-term) conjunctivitis (inflammation of the tissues surrounding the eyeball) and rhinitis (characterized by a runny nose and/or sneezing) is a persistent herpes infection. Some cats acquire a herpes infection early in life, then never eliminate it from the body. From time to time (up to several times a year and often after a stressful event) cats develop mild symptoms which generally do not require medical attention.

Are URIs contagious to people?

Although it may seem that you and your cat sometimes get sick at the same time, the viruses that cause feline URIs are *not* transmissible to humans, and vice versa. The more likely explanation for this is that a pet and its owner may experience common stressors (such as changes in weather). However, in extremely rare cases, humans and cats may both be affected by *Chlamydia* (a bacterium). *The feline herpesvirus is not related to human herpes infections.*