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FELINE UPPER RESPIRATORY TRACT INFECTION

Sniffing, sneezing, and runny nose are all primary signs that your cat is suffering from an upper respiratory tract infection. While you may expect to suffer similarly on a seasonal basis, your cat likely carries the viruses responsible for his upper respiratory infections throughout his life, and he will suffer from occasional flare-ups.

A Common Problem

The problem is “pretty common” as James R. Richards, DVM, director of the Cornell Feline Health Center, puts it. The two main viruses responsible for feline upper respiratory tract infections, feline calicivirus and feline herpesvirus (also known as feline rhinotracheitis virus), are so ubiquitous, Dr. Richards says, that “every cat in the world is exposed to both or either.” In addition to the primary signs of these infections, cats may develop conjunctivitis (runny eyes), ulcers in the mouth or on the tongue or nose, and, in severe cases, disease in the lungs or joints. These are caused by the viruses themselves or by the secondary infections that cats may acquire from bacteria.

Always Present

Most cats infected with herpesvirus remain in a latent carrier state, periodically shedding virus from their respiratory tracts, although they themselves may not be sick. Calicivirus can lay dormant in a cat’s oral tissues for many years. Young kittens are particularly susceptible to upper respiratory infections, and, because their immune systems are not mature, the consequences are more severe. Because almost all cats carry the viruses, and because kittens fall prey to upper respiratory tract infections easily, catteries and shelters often have outbreaks.

Kittens coming unto a shelter are susceptible to the viruses being shed by the older resident cats. The kittens then become infected, thus amplifying the problem.

You might experience a similar situation if you adopt a young kitten into a household with a seemingly healthy older cat. A week after the new kitten arrives; the older cat may begin to sniffle, as a result of what Dr. Richards terms the “stress of a new cat on board.” Just as a young kitten’s immune system can’t fight off disease effectively, so, too, an adult cat under stress may suffer from decreased immunity. This leaves the stressed cat susceptible to the viruses that he normally carries with no untoward consequences.

Providing Some Protection

While you might expect that a vaccinated cat would be fully protected, this isn't necessarily the case. Vaccines are very effective but not perfect, and they may only protect cats from the serious signs of disease, Dr. Richards says. That means that a vaccinated cat may suffer only a mild infection rather than a full-blown one.

Vaccines, however, are highly recommended, Dr. Richards points out, since they reduce the severity of the infection. They are especially important since "you have to assume your cat will get exposed," Dr. Richards says, and the risk increases concomitantly with exposure to other cats. Your cat can be vaccinated either with an injection or with nose drops, usually as a part of a "three-in-one" or "three-way" vaccination that protects against both of the primary upper respiratory viruses, along with panleukopenia. While veterinarians have traditionally recommended updating vaccinations on a yearly basis, some now believe every three years is adequate.

Treatment

If your cat develops an upper respiratory tract infection, it is likely to be a fairly mild case. The cat will usually recover with adequate supportive measures, such as fluid therapy and nourishment, and treatment with antibiotics if there are any secondary infections. It helps to keep the nasal passages clear. You can place him in a steamy bathroom for 15-20 minutes per day, or in a room with a vaporizer overnight, to help clear out excess discharge. Severe infections may warrant hospitalization. If signs continue for more than a few days or become worse, take the cat to the veterinarian.