



Upper Respiratory Disease in Cats and Kittens

There are 3 main causes for upper respiratory disease in cats and kittens. Two are viruses (Herpesvirus and Calicivirus) that account for 80-90% of the cases. The other is a bacteria-like organism (Chlamydia) that composes the remaining 10-20% of the case. The disease is spread by direct cat-to-cat contact and indirectly on bowls, brushes, hands, clothing, etc. Airborne transmission can occur for very short distances (less than 4 feet). Saliva, nasal and eye secretions contain the organisms that can infect another cat. Calicivirus can persist in the environment for as long as 8-10 days. Herpesvirus and Chlamydia are not that hardy. All three organisms are killed by bleach and alcohol.

Two different disease patterns are seen with upper respiratory infections. There is the acute phase, usually 2-8 days after exposure, when the cat/kitten will sneeze and have discharge from their eyes and nose. They may run a fever, lose weight or have sores in their mouth. Dehydration can be a problem, especially in younger cats. Rarely, the disease can turn into pneumonia resulting in death without aggressive treatment.

The second phase of the disease is the chronic carrier state. Those cats will usually have no symptoms except when under stress and may shed the virus at these times. Chlamydia organisms can be shed almost continually by chronic carriers.

The key to getting a cat through an acute episode of upper respiratory disease is good nursing care. Keep their eyes and nose clear of discharge. Encourage them to eat and drink. Keep them in a warm environment. The humidity in the bathroom when someone is in the shower will help clear their airways. Antibiotics may be needed if they get a secondary bacterial infection. In extreme cases, IV fluid therapy may be needed to combat dehydration.

Vaccinations can do a lot to prevent the occurrence and severity of upper respiratory disease. Immunity is short-lived so annual vaccination updates are essential. In the multi-cat household or cattery environment steps can be taken to decrease the incidence of upper respiratory disease (as well as other infectious diseases). Increasing ventilation, preventing overcrowding and isolating sick individuals will help prevent the spread of disease. Thoroughly clean all food bowls, combs, etc. Washing your hands after handling a sick cat is also important to prevent the spread of disease.

Upper respiratory diseases in cats is a common and often frustrating problem. With the proper care, most cats go on to live a long and healthy life.