



Upper Respiratory Infection

A cat's upper respiratory tract – the nose, throat and sinus area – is susceptible to infections caused by a variety of viruses and bacteria. By far, viruses are the most common cause of Upper Respiratory Infection (URI) in cats, making a URI similar to a common cold in humans. These viruses can be transmitted from cat to cat through sneezing, while grooming, or sharing water and food bowls, and are common in shelters, catteries and multi-cat households. Once infected, cats can become carriers for life, and though they may not show clinical signs, they can still transmit the viruses to others.

Symptoms of URI include: sneezing, congestion, red or runny eyes, clear to colored nasal discharge, gagging, drooling, fever, loss of appetite, rapid or open-mouth breathing, nasal or oral ulcers, and decreased activity.

URI is contagious to other cats, and a symptomatic animal should be isolated from other cats. URI is usually treated with supportive care, including rest, fluids, and nutritional support. URI is very rarely fatal and will usually resolve within 1 to 2 weeks. In some cases, URI can be treated with medications. Antibiotics can be given to treat a secondary bacterial infection. In rare cases, URI can cause serious disease such as pneumonia. Also, sick cats may not eat or drink adequate amounts and may become severely dehydrated. In such cases, hospitalization and fluid supplement may be needed.

Age, vaccination status and physical condition all play a role in a cat's susceptibility to URI, but cats who live in multi-cat households or shelters are most susceptible. Stress also plays a role in causing outbreaks of URI. Cats who have recovered from URI can become carriers, and may experience recurrences when stressed.

To help prevent your cat from URI:

- Keep your cat indoors to minimize the risk of exposure to infected animals.
- Isolate infected cats to protect other pets living in the same environment.
- Minimize stress.
- Keep your cat up to date on vaccines as recommended by your vet. Vaccines for upper respiratory disease in cats may not actually prevent infection, but they help lessen the severity of the disease in some cases.
- Regular veterinary exams and preventative care can help catch and treat problems early. A cat's best defense against URI is a healthy immune system. Practice good hygiene and wash your hands thoroughly when handling multiple cats.

If you suspect your cat has URI, isolate your cat from all other cats. Seek treatment from your veterinarian if your cat is not eating for more than 24 hours, has green or yellow discharge from nose or eyes, has difficulty breathing (especially panting or breathing through an open mouth), or appears unresponsive. Serious cases of URI can lead to pneumonia if left untreated.

*Information provided in part by the ASPCA.
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