



ALL CATS HEALTHCARE CLINIC
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How to Manage Kitty Colds

During the cold and flu season, cat owners often ask me if their pets can catch human cold viruses. The answer is probably not. Most viruses are species specific, which means humans get human viruses and cats get cat viruses. Unfortunately, cures for human upper respiratory viruses do not exist, so treatment involves relieving symptoms and trying to prevent secondary bacterial infections. The same is true for feline upper respiratory infections (URI's), also known as kitty colds.

Viral kitty colds usually cause sneezing and clear discharge from the nose and eyes. A fever, appetite loss, enlarged lymph nodes and yellow or green discharge from the eyes and nose characterize a more serious feline URI, which is a combination of a virus and a bacterial infection. If these additional symptoms are present, veterinarians often prescribe antibiotics to fight the infection's bacterial component.

It's common for the virus to affect multiple cats in a household. Cats can also contract URI's without contact from other cats, a fact that often surprises indoor cat owners. Most of the viruses that cause these infections are airborne, and some are transmitted through water. Filtering all outside air and water would be the only way to prevent these viruses from entering a home. Thus, indoor cats are still at risk.

The basic cat booster vaccine protects against common respiratory infectious agents. The vaccine is either three-way, containing antigens to feline rhinotracheitis, calici and panleukopenia viruses, or four-way, which also includes antigens to Chlamydia. Rhinotracheitis is a feline herpes virus that can cause sneezing, conjunctivitis and sinus congestion. Calici virus can cause sneezing, mouth blisters, fever, and congestion. Chlamydia is a type of bacteria that can cause conjunctivitis and respiratory inflammation. Even consistently vaccinated cats are susceptible to URI's because the vaccines do not prevent infection; vaccines only lessen the severity of clinical signs.

The herpes virus is one of the most common feline upper respiratory viruses. Herpes viruses tend to be intermittently active in carrier cats, which mean the associated respiratory signs can be recurrent, making dealing with kitty colds frustrating.

What should you do if you suspect your cat has an upper respiratory infection? First, assess its ability to eat, drink and breathe adequately. If the discharges are clear and your cat is eating and drinking normally, you may need to only wipe its eyes and nose clear. If your pet is depressed, not eating or is having difficulty breathing, ask your veterinarian to examine your cat. Cats that cannot smell may not eat well. You can try to help open your cat's airways by placing it in a steamy bathroom or by using a vaporizer. Do not give your pet any human over the counter cold medications, as most of these products contain aspirin or acetaminophen that could be deadly to the animal.

If your cat is sick with a URI, your veterinarian may prescribe antibiotics, antihistamines, nasal sprays, interferon (a drug that stimulates the body's own cells to fight infection) or the amino acid L-lysine (another compound that helps booster immunity.) Cats that become dehydrated may need fluid supplements. Force-feeding may be necessary for cats that are not eating.

Cats with URI's sneeze a lot. Since they cannot blow their noses, a lot of mucous can build up in their noses and sinuses, which can trigger sneezing. Unfortunately, no medication or method exists to help stop these attacks, but veterinarians will sometimes use antihistamines to help relieve congestion and sneezing.

The most important thing to remember if your cat has a URI is to be patient. Do not have unrealistic expectations about how long you think it should take for your pet to return to full health. Think about the last time you had a cold – the sneezing and congestion probably lasted anywhere from a few days to a couple of weeks. Even though you might have felt better after a few days, you were probably blowing your nose for quite a while longer. The same can be true for cats, so try to keep your pet as comfortable as possible and seek veterinary advice if signs progress.

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