

Upper Respiratory Tract Infection - Cats

Overview

Feline upper respiratory infection refers to infections in the area of the nose, throat and sinus area, much like the common cold in humans. In cats, these infections are quite common and very contagious and commonly caused by one or multiple organisms. The two primary viruses involved are feline herpesvirus-1 and feline calicivirus and the bacterial organisms involved can be feline chlamydia and bordetella bronchiseptica. Some of the organisms can also cause ulcers in the mouth and eye infections.

Cats susceptible to upper respiratory infections generally develop signs about two to five days after exposure. Fever and sinus congestion may also occur. The disease typically resolves in 10-14 days, without complications. Very young kittens have a higher incidence of pneumonia and some do not survive the infection.

Diagnosis and Treatment Notes:

- Feline upper respiratory infection is generally diagnosed by a thorough history and physical examination. Chest x-rays may be recommended to evaluate for pneumonia.
- Treatment depends on the severity of the disease, your individual pet, and your veterinarian. Since most infections are viral, there are no drugs available to kill the virus so treatment is aimed at treating the symptoms. Basic treatment usually includes proper diet and sufficient fluids, antibiotics, nebulization (a process to humidify the air and keep the nasal passages moist), and eye medications if eye infections or ulcers are present. Discuss treatment details when your pet is diagnosed with this condition.

What to Watch for*:

- Sneezing
- Watery eyes
- Nasal discharge
- Poor appetite
- Drooling
- Breathing problems
- Open mouth breathing
- Coughing

Feline Leukemia Virus

Overview

Feline leukemia virus (FeLV) is a retroviral disease that impairs immune system function and causes anemia and some types of cancer. FeLV is transmitted by prolonged close contact with an infected cat. Kittens can be born with FeLV or acquire the virus through their mother's milk.

The average age of infection is 3 years and male cats may have a higher prevalence of infection than female cats.

Diagnosis and Treatment Notes:

- Feline leukemia is diagnosed through blood tests including an ELISA (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay) or IFA (indirect immunofluorescence) test.
- Treatment depends on the severity of the disease, your individual pet, and your veterinarian. There is no specific treatment for feline leukemia. Antibiotics are used to treat infections. Tumors are often biopsied and surgery may be needed. Chemotherapy may be used to treat cancer. Blood transfusion may be needed for severe anemia. Nutritional support is important in maintaining health. Discuss treatment details when your pet is diagnosed with this condition.

What to Watch for*:

- Chronic infections
- Anemia
- Weight loss
- Difficulty breathing
- Eye problems
- Lethargy
- Poor wound healing

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus

Overview

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) is a viral infection that attacks the immune system of cats. It is a retrovirus similar to Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), and a syndrome similar to AIDS occurs in cats. Affected cats may have a variety of symptoms including infections caused by a poorly functioning immune system, anemia and low blood-cell counts, infections of the gums and mouth, cancer or neurologic disease.

FIV is not contagious to people; it is an infectious disease spread from cat to cat, primarily by biting. FIV has been found in the mother's milk and can be transmitted from mother to kitten. Transmission among household cats through normal contact is thought to be unlikely. Outdoor and male cats are predisposed.

Diagnosis and Treatment Notes:

- FIV is diagnosed through blood tests such as an ELISA (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay), IFA (indirect immunofluoresence) or Western blot test. Cats that have been vaccinated for FIV will have positive test results. For this reason, only unvaccinated cats should be tested.
- Treatment depends on the disease process, your individual pet, and your veterinarian. Antibiotics are used to treat bacterial infections. Nutritional support is important to maintain health. Masses may be biopsied and surgically removed. Affected cats should be kept indoors to prevent spread of the virus. Discuss treatment details when your pet is diagnosed with this condition.

What to Watch for*:

- Chronic infections
- Non-healing wounds
- Lethargy
- Weakness
- Loss of appetite

Feline Infectious Peritonitis

Overview

Feline infectious peritonitis (FIP) is a progressive and ultimately fatal disease of cats caused by a coronavirus. Many cats are infected with a relatively benign form of the coronavirus but only in certain cats will the virus mutate to become pathologic (FIP).

Previously, it was suggested that cats could transmit the disease to other cats by saliva, urine, and feces. It was also suggested that multi-cat households may increase the risk of disease. Cats living with an FIP cat will be no more likely to have this mutation in the future than they otherwise would have been not being exposed to the FIP cat.

There are two forms of the disease: effusive and non-effusive. The characteristic sign of the effusive form is the accumulation of fluid in the chest or abdomen. The non-effusive form is more difficult to diagnose and is characterized by weight loss, depression and fever.

Diagnosis and Treatment Notes:

- Feline infectious peritonitis is difficult to diagnose. Blood work, including an FIP titer (serum antibody test). This test will identify exposure to any coronavirus and is not specific to FIP. If the cat has the effusive form of disease, analysis of the fluid can help confirm the diagnosis. The non-effusive form is more difficult to diagnose.
- Treatment depends on the disease process, your individual pet, and your veterinarian. Dehydrated cats are treated with either subcutaneous or intravenous fluids. Some cats can benefit from cortisone. Antibiotics are used to treat infections. Nutritional support is important in maintaining health. Discuss treatment details when your pet is diagnosed with this condition.

What to Watch for*:

- Fever
- Lethargy
- Loss of appetite
- Weight loss
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Jaundice (yellow color of the skin, eyes, ears, nose or gums)
- Pale gums
- Distended abdomen (in effusive FIP)
- Difficulty breathing (from fluid accumulation in the chest)

RABIES

- Rabies is a deadly disease that is generally fatal in all species.
- It is transmitted through contact with saliva of an infected animal.
- There is no effective treatment in animals. It is virtually preventable through vaccination.

What Is It?

Rabies is a deadly disease caused by a virus that attacks the central nervous system. All warm-blooded animals, including wild animals, dogs, cats, and humans, are susceptible to it. Once clinical signs appear, rabies is generally fatal. However, the disease is also generally preventable through vaccination.

While the disease is not common, it remains prevalent in wildlife populations—primarily raccoons, bats, foxes, and skunks—that may have contact with domestic animals. Pets are at risk of contracting the disease from wild animals and potentially transmitting it to humans.

The virus can have an incubation period lasting from days to months. Rabies is usually transmitted through contact with the saliva of an infected animal. An animal's saliva becomes infective once the virus has traveled through the animal's nervous system from the initial bite site to the brain and, ultimately, the salivary glands. Pets and people usually become infected through a bite wound. Once the virus enters the salivary glands, the animal can pass the infection to other animals or humans through saliva. Animals with rabies are referred to as *rabid*.

Signs of Rabies

Clinical signs can be vague and difficult to identify. Signs can progress through several stages, and not all infected animals show evidence of all stages:

- **Early signs:** Fever, acting nervous or agitated, hiding
- **Later signs:** Aggression, increased agitation, erratic behavior
- **End stage:** Muscle weakness and paralysis, coma, death

Rabid animals can show unusual agitation or aggression or appear “drunk” or unable to walk. Seizures and drooling may also occur. Drooling results from paralysis of the throat muscles, preventing swallowing. Once signs appear, death usually occurs within 10 days.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Rabies is diagnosed in animals based on clinical signs and postmortem (after death) laboratory testing of brain tissue. There is no effective treatment in animals.

Prevention

Because of the potentially serious human health implications, rabies vaccination of dogs is required by law in virtually all states, and many states also require cats to be vaccinated. Vaccination is the most effective way to prevent the disease in animals and, in doing so, to safeguard human health. In addition, it is recommended that you minimize your pets' exposure to animals that may transmit the infection.

Your veterinarian can advise you of the rabies vaccination schedule required for your state. Some states require an initial vaccination at 12 to 16 weeks of age, a second vaccine at 1 year of age, and subsequent vaccinations every 3 years. Other states require annual revaccination.

Other preventive measures include:

- Keeping your pet away from wildlife
- Ensuring that all other dogs or cats that your pet has contact with are vaccinated

- Minimizing contact with stray animals; do not feed stray animals with an unknown vaccination status or allow them to remain near your home and pets

Vaccination helps protect your pet from unnecessary euthanasia or extended quarantine if your pet has contact with a rabid animal. Any pet that bites a human and has an unknown or out-of-date vaccination status may be subject to quarantine or euthanasia, depending on state laws.