



# Feline Upper Respiratory Infections (URI)

## What Causes an Upper Respiratory Infection?

There are several potential causes of respiratory symptoms in cats, including viral infections, bacterial infections and fungal infections. In a humane society, viral and secondary bacterial infections are the most common causes of feline "URI." There are two common viral diseases; Herpes Virus and Calici Virus. Herpes, or Rhinotracheitis, as it is also known, is thought to cause >90% of the respiratory infections in cat populations. Calici is less commonly seen. Secondary bacterial infections often develop when the respiratory mucosa is altered from the virus.

## Why do so many cats in shelters get Upper Respiratory Infections?

Age, resistance, vaccination status, physical condition, nutritional state and environment play a role in a cat's susceptibility to URI. There is much evidence that stress plays a role in causing outbreaks of URI in cat populations, and cats in any shelter, boarding facility or cattery are generally experiencing high levels of stress. Some cats that have recovered from URI become carriers of the viral diseases and will experience recurrences when stressed that lead to infection of other cats. Shelters often admit cats that are already shedding virus although displaying minimal symptoms. These carriers make prevention of URI very difficult. Even in a clean facility that takes appropriate measures to quarantine symptomatic animals, URI is an inevitable consequence of housing multiple cats in close quarters. The viruses have an incubation period of between 3-14 days, so sometimes a cat will appear healthy on the day of adoption, but show symptoms over the next few days because a virus was incubating. It is important to know what to watch for.

## What are the symptoms of an Upper Respiratory Infection?

Symptoms of URI can vary from extremely mild to quite severe. Sneezing is common. Fever, depression, anorexia, nasal and ocular discharge, coughing, salivation, oral and nasal ulceration, open mouth breathing, congestion and rapid breathing are other symptoms to watch for.

## How will I know if I should take my cat to the veterinarian for a URI?

Any cat developing an upper respiratory infection should be under veterinary supervision. A brief exam by a veterinarian will help to determine if your cat requires medication, has a fever, or is dehydrated.

## How is an Upper Respiratory Infection usually treated?

If a cat is just sneezing, but is otherwise acting normally (eating, drinking and active, with no nasal discharge), no treatment will likely be needed. There is no need for antibiotics at this stage, as the symptoms are still only viral. In fact, if veterinarians were to treat animals routinely with antibiotics when they did not have evidence of bacterial infections, this could lead to bacteria that develop a resistance to common antibiotics. However, if a cat begins to show yellow /cloudy/green nasal discharge, there is evidence of a secondary bacterial infection and cause for starting antibiotics.

Antibiotics are usually given for 7-10 days. Some cats become congested and require special food to tempt their appetite if they can't smell their dry food. Moist, fish-flavored food warmed in the microwave is often helpful. Sometimes cats will have to be forced fed tiny bites or syringe fed for a few days until they feel better and can smell their food. A humidifier in the cat's environment or time in a steamy bathroom can help the congestion. Topical eye medication may be needed if the eyes become inflamed with a secondary bacterial infection. Some cats may develop a high fever (>105) for a day or two or become dehydrated and need fluids administered by a veterinarian. Generally, the treatment is simple and supportive, and cats typically recover within 1-2 weeks. It is unusual for a cat to require hospitalization for a URI, and most owners can be taught to care for a sick cat at home quite well if they desire.

### **Is a URI contagious?**

Feline URI are generally not contagious to humans or other species. There is one bacterial form of the feline cold that can rarely be transmitted to immune-compromised humans and dogs, but this is uncommon. The colds ARE contagious to other cats, and it is advised to keep a new cat entering the household separate for 1-2 weeks until all cats are adjusted and health status is assessed. The respiratory infections are spread through direct contact and through aerosolized droplets (sneezes and saliva), so separate rooms and good hygiene are suggested if a sick cat is in a multi-cat environment.

### **Do vaccinations prevent Upper Respiratory Infections?**

Unfortunately, no. The FVRCP vaccines contain protection for Calici and Herpes viruses, but are not a 100% guarantee that a cat will not experience infection. Typically, a well vaccinated cat will become less ill when infected than an unvaccinated cat. There are many strains of virus that cats encounter, and the vaccines we have do not protect against them all. Additionally, in a shelter environment, although we often vaccinate the day a cat enters the shelter, sometimes animals come to us already carrying respiratory illnesses without being symptomatic, or they have been exposed before the vaccines have time to help them build their immunity. So although vaccines do serve a purpose in lessening severity of infection, they do not prevent URI.

### **What does it mean if I adopt a cat that is "Recovering from URI"?**

If you adopt a cat that is "recovering from URI" this cat has already been through a treatment for a respiratory infection at SFAS's isolation ward. The medical progress notes should indicate whether antibiotics were given and when. You should expect to continue to hear some sneezing (cats often sneeze for a month or more after an infection). Cats can have relapses of respiratory infections, especially with the stress of moving into a new home, so watch for all of the symptoms mentioned above.

### **Who do I call if the cat I adopt has URI?**

Your regular veterinarian will be a resource for the lifetime of your new pet and the free health exam received at the time of adoption can be used for a URI check-up. We recommend becoming established with your regular veterinarian as soon as possible after adopting your new pet, and this would be a good opportunity to do so. However, if within 5 days of adoption you have any unanswered questions or concerns about an upper respiratory infection, please don't hesitate to call SFAS. The veterinary services department at the SF&AS wants you to feel comfortable with your new companion and is experienced in treating upper respiratory infections in cats.