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Feline Respiratory Disease

Respiratory infections in cats and kittens are one of the most common infectious diseases seen at veterinary facilities. Cats in animal shelters, rescue organizations, breeding catteries, farms, and feral cat colonies have the highest incidence of the disease. Respiratory Disease is also known as Upper Respiratory Infection (URI) or Complex.

Clinical signs of Feline Respiratory Disease (FRD) include lethargy (lack of energy), sneezing, coughing, inappetence (lack of appetite), matted eyes, excessive eye and/or nasal discharge (clear to cloudy in color, watery to thick in consistency), red or swollen eyes, drooling, excessive saliva production, mouth or gum ulcers, nose ulcers, diarrhea, open mouth breathing, and difficulty breathing (clinical sign of pneumonia).

The clinical course of the disease usually starts with sneezing, watery eyes, and a nasal discharge that over several days turns to a thick cloudy discharge. A fever will usually ensue and the pet may not want to eat or drink. Dehydration may then cause severe progression of the disease and possibly even death. Infection with more than one infective agent and a parasite burden usually makes the clinical signs more severe.

Vaccines against the infective agents causing FRD help to greatly decrease the incidence of the disease, but do not eliminate the disease entirely. Many cats (an estimated 92%) are carriers of Feline Herpes Virus (the most common cause of FRD). Most kittens contract some of the agents causing FRD from their mother before they are vaccinated.

The most common agents causing FRD are viruses, bacteria, fungi, and protozoal organisms. Feline Herpes Virus Type 1 (FHV-1), and Feline Calicivirus (FCV) are two of the most common viruses causing FRD. *Chlamydophila felis* is another significant cause of FRD and is a mycoplasmal organism. Other infectious causes of FRD include *Bordetella bronchiseptica*, Streptococcus (bacterial organisms), Feline Leukemia Virus, Feline Immunodeficiency Virus, Avian H5N1 Influenza Virus, and Cryptococcus (fungal organisms).

Feline Herpes Virus infections can cause continual or reoccurring infections in some cats. The virus lives in nervous tissue and can cause repeated infections, especially during times of stress (another illness, new pet coming into the household, moving to a new home, etc.).

Treatment for FRD can consist of oral and/or ocular antibiotics to clear secondary bacterial infections. Anti-viral agents, nebulization, supportive care with fluids and supplemental feedings, and appetite stimulants may be indicated. Starting medical treatment early in the course of the disease gives the patient the best medical outcome.

To prevent spread of the disease, contact with infective individuals should be avoided. Isolate infected individuals from normal individuals. Wash hands and change clothes after handling infected individuals before handling unaffected cats. In addition, vaccinating pets against infective agents with disease protecting immunizations starting at 6-8 weeks of age, boosting the vaccinations at 3-4 week intervals until the kitten is 12-16 weeks of age, and again a year later. After that your veterinarian will develop a vaccination protocol that fits the needs of your cat.

If you have any questions please discuss them with your veterinarian.