

Upper Respiratory Disease in Cats

Information for new adopters

Feline Upper Respiratory Infection (URI) is similar to a common cold in humans. It is especially common in cats that have been exposed to a lot of other cats, such as at an animal shelter. URI is very rarely fatal, and usually resolves within one to three weeks. Treatment generally consists of supportive care. In addition, antibiotics are sometimes given to treat possible bacterial infections. However, although secondary bacterial infections can make the problem worse, the underlying cause is often a viral infection. Viral infections are not cured by antibiotics as with the common cold, there is no completely effective treatment besides time and allowing the cat's own immune system to do its job.

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 supplementation may be needed.

How contagious is URI and can your own pets contract it?

URI is contagious to other cats. Most cats are vaccinated against it (it's part of the standard yearly vaccination program recommended by most vets). However, the vaccine is not 100% protective, so it's a good idea to isolate cats that are showing signs of the disease, and wash hands after handling sick cats. (In general we recommend isolating all new arrivals in your household for 8-10 days after adoption, to give them a chance to settle in and make sure they are not coming down with anything.) **URI is not contagious to people or other animals.**

What are the signs of URI?

- Sneezing
- Runny nose
- Red and or runny eyes
- Sores on the tongue, lips, nose or roof of mouth
- Fever
- Lack of appetite
- Decreased energy

When should you contact a veterinarian?

First, it important to state that every animal adopted from a shelter should be taken for an examination by your regular vet within at most 3 days of adoption. With rest and good care, many cats will recover from mild URI in one or two weeks. Sometimes cats need additional help, however. If your cat has any of the following signs, contact your veterinarian.

- Not eating for more than 24 hours.
- Green or yellow discharge from the nose or eyes (your veterinarian may prescribe antibiotics for this).
- Gently clean the cat's nose and eyes with a soft cloth moistened with warm water.
- Difficulty breathing, especially panting or breathing through an open mouth.
- Depressed or unresponsive cat: a slight decrease in activity is expected, but contact your vet if the cat is much less active than usual or than you would expect.
- Vomiting or diarrhea that lasts more than 24 hours.
- Little or no improvement after a week of home care