FELINE UPPER RESPIRATORY INFECTION (URI)

What is it? Upper respiratory infections in cats usually are caused by viruses. Herpesvirus and Calicivirus account for about 90% of such infections. Other organisms may contribute to disease symptoms including, Chlamyophilia, Mycoplasma, and Bordetella.

What animals are affected? Upper respiratory infections occur most commonly in cats that are housed in close quarters such as catteries, boarding facilities, humane societies, and veterinary hospitals. Outdoor cats also are at higher risk since they may come in contact with other affected cats. Persian and other short-faced breeds are more prone to infection due to their conformation and associated upper respiratory problems. Kittens are the most susceptible since they have an immature immune system.

What are the signs? Symptoms may include sneezing, nasal discharge, watery eyes, coughing, fever, voice change, oral ulcers, lethargic behavior, poor appetite, breathing difficulty, and open mouth breathing.

How is it diagnosed? Diagnosis is based on clinical symptoms. Identification of the precise underlying virus often is not necessary. Virus isolation can be performed if necessary.

How is it treated? Supportive care and good nursing care are important components of treatment. Regular gentle cleaning of ocular and nasal discharge is essential. Offering strongly flavored, odiferous foods may help to stimulate the appetite. In some cases, antibiotic therapy is warranted to treat secondary bacterial infections, and antibiotic eye ointments may be dispensed to treat the ocular symptoms. With severe symptoms such as open mouth breathing and anorexia, some cats will need to be hospitalized for IV fluids and supportive care. Symptoms of an upper respiratory infection may persist for 2-10 days.

What after care is needed? Aggressive supportive care may be needed during recovery, but aftercare generally is not needed.

What is the prognosis? The prognosis is generally good. Cats can develop some degree of immunity after natural infection with some of the viruses. However, immunity is not always complete or of long duration, and cats can develop upper respiratory symptoms due to infection with another virus or organism.

Can it be prevented? There are a variety of vaccinations available, although these are not 100% effective since virus strains can mutate, and cats may not always mount an adequate immune response to a particular vaccine. Husbandry plays an important role in reducing infection – limit crowding, limit exposure of healthy cats to infected cats, and keep kennels and catteries clean.