



What Cat Owners Need to Know About Upper Respiratory Infection

Upper respiratory infection (URI) is a highly contagious and common viral condition in cats. It is the most frequent cause of illness for shelter cats and can affect any cat, especially one that has spent time in a multi-cat environment. It is similar to the common cold in humans and usually clears itself within one to three weeks, though sometimes antibiotics are needed to treat secondary bacterial infections that occur. Occasionally it can cause chronic health problems following recovery from initial infection, though these are usually manageable.

URI can be a death sentence to shelter cats because organizations lack the resources to prevent its spread or care for sick cats. Even with treatment, many affected cats carry the virus for life and may have recurrent outbreaks when stressed.

The University of California–Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program provides the following information about URI.

Prevention

- **Vaccination:** Standard one to three year vaccination programs for cats include a vaccine for the two most important viruses that cause URI; however, the vaccine isn't 100 percent effective and usually only reduces the severity of disease.
 - Most cats need to be vaccinated at least every three years after completing the initial vaccine series.
 - High risk cats, such as pets that live in homes that provide seasonal foster care for kittens, may benefit from annual revaccination for the respiratory viruses. This is available as a subcutaneous or intranasal vaccine.
- **Isolation:** Isolate cats showing signs of disease. Cats new to the household should be kept from other cats for 8-10 days to reduce the chance that they are contagious (always a good idea anyway to let cats get to know each other gradually).
- **Cleanliness:** Always wash hands after handling sick cats, before and after visiting an animal shelter or pet store.
- **Stress:** Reduce stress factors that could prompt re-occurrence of the virus

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

How can you help a cat with URI feel better?

- Offer the cat wet food that has been slightly warmed (this will help the sick cat smell the food, which will make her more inclined to eat)
- Place the cat in the bathroom while you are showering or place a humidifier in a small room with the cat to help loosen respiratory secretions
- Gently clean the cat's nose and eyes with a soft cloth moistened with warm water if they become crusted with mucous

When should you contact a veterinarian?

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)
- 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

How Can You Help?

To improve the health of shelter cats, Morris Animal Foundation established the Helping Shelters Help Cats program. Through this program – part of the Happy Healthy Cat Campaign – MAF will fund three feline health research studies that look at preventing upper respiratory disease in cats and reducing their stress while they await adoption.

Please [donate today](#) to support research that will save the lives of cats in shelters.