

Mid Hudson Animal Hospital

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How To Treat Your Cat's Upper Respiratory Infection

Your cat seems to be suffering from an upper respiratory infection. What is an upper respiratory infection and how will it affect your kitty? This infection is caused by a number of different viruses and virus like organisms. In some ways it resembles the flu in humans. Like the flu, very young and very old victims are often the most seriously affected.

The most common symptoms that we see are sneezing, runny eyes, runny nose and a decrease in appetite. However many other symptoms can be observed. Among them are cough, vomiting, profuse drooling, ulcers on the mouth, lips and eyes, and complete loss of appetite.

Just as an untreated flu in humans can lead to serious complications such as pneumonia and heart infection, letting your cat's upper respiratory infection run its "natural course" can lead to a very serious or even a fatal outcome. Some respiratory viruses attack the eyes and "eat away" at the cornea, the clear part of the eye. The affected eye, becomes very painful, the lids swell shut, the cornea becomes cloudy and in many cases a deep ulcer develops. Some cats lose sight in the affected eye. Cats need to smell food to stimulate their appetite. A stuffy nose alone will decrease a cat's appetite. When complicated by painful oral ulcers affected cats often stop eating and drinking for weeks until the ulcers heal. Cats affected in this way become dehydrated and lose the energy to fight their illness. Untreated many of these cats will die.

How can we help your cat recover from this condition? The road to recovery is paved by a partnership between our medical care and your in-home nursing care.

Medical care begins the process and consists of some or all of the items below:

- ◆ Antibiotics; These do not cure viral infections. However when a virus invades your cat's respiratory system, it weakens the cat's normal disease fighting mechanisms. Bacteria that harmlessly live in the nose and lungs are now able to reproduce and make the original viral infection considerably more serious. Antibiotics are used to control these bacteria.
- ◆ Interferon: We mix this powerful anti-viral antibody with the antibiotic to achieve a one-two punch by killing bacteria and viruses at the same time
- ◆ Antihistamine/nasal decongestant; It is difficult for a cat to eat and breathe at the same time with a stuffed nose. Furthermore, if a cat can't smell his food he won't eat as much. A decongestant will clear the nose and allow your cat to breathe properly and smell his food.
- ◆ Vitamins; Vitamins help your cat's immune system make antibodies to kill the invading viruses and bacteria.
- ◆ Eye drops; Antiviral or antibiotic ointments or drops are use to treat cases where the virus or bacteria has invaded the cornea.

Home nursing care is equally important and involves the following:

- ◆ **Cleaning of discharges;** It is very important that you keep your cat's nose and eyes clear of discharges. Nasal and eye discharges are good breeding grounds for bacteria. The quicker you remove them, the fewer bacteria your cat's system has to destroy which leaves your cat more energy to deal with the virus that is causing his disease. This can be accomplished by wiping away the discharges with a moistened cotton ball. Since sores develop easily from respiratory infections please make sure you are *very gentle* when you clean your cat's face.
- ◆ **Feeding;** This is the most important thing you can do to help your cat recover quickly and completely. Regardless of how much sneezing and coughing a cat does and how miserable he feels, if he continues to eat he will recover. You can encourage him to eat by warming his food in the microwave, feeding him especially smelly food (such as canned sardines), or feeding him some good people food like meat, cold cuts, or cottage cheese. If this doesn't work he can be force fed with a food that has a paste like consistency such as baby food or Hills Prescription Diet a/d. This can be accomplished by getting some food on your finger and smearing it in your cat's mouth. It's sloppy but it works.

Severe or life threatening respiratory infections:

Some cats are very severely affected by upper respiratory infections. Such cats are impossible to force feed and they drool profusely because of large, extremely painful ulcers on their tongue and roof of their mouths. These cats can be fitted with a temporary feeding tube through which you can squirt syringe fulls of blended cat food. After a few weeks the infection subsides, the mouth heals and the feeding tube can be removed. The other serious complication are deep corneal ulcers. Cats so affected can lose vision if not treated adequately. Treatment of this condition involves temporary surgical closure of the affected eye. The ulcer then is able to heal under the protective eyelids. After about 2 weeks the sutures are removed and the eye has healed usually leaving only a small scar on the cornea.

Most cats are well within two weeks. Some cats however continue to be ill and run a fever for weeks and weeks. These cats are often afflicted with more than a simple respiratory infection. They will need to be tested for feline leukemia and feline aids. A majority of cats that do not recover from an upper respiratory infection are afflicted with one of these other diseases.

Complications:

Normally, recovery from an upper respiratory infection is complete. Sometimes however a cat's tear duct may become scarred resulting in an eye discharge on and off for life. There is no effective treatment for this condition. You are limited to keeping the eye clean and free of discharges when they occur and using antibiotic ointments or drops if the discharge gets infected. The second major complication is a chronic sinus infection exemplified by intermittent sneezing and nasal discharge. Long term antibiotics and/or surgical resection of the sinuses can sometimes clear up this condition though often it too is a lifelong condition which will stop for months only to reoccur again at some later date.

In conclusion:

If you follow the above instructions your cat should soon recover his good health. Don't be alarmed that an intermittent sneeze may hang on for a month or so. It will eventually go away. Please don't hesitate to call us if your cat stops eating all together, you are having trouble giving medications or you just need to ask a question.