

Infection Alert

Your cat's cold can be deadly without timely treatment. Learn the facts about herpes virus and calicivirus.

Brenda McClelland, DVM, & Narda G. Robinson, DO, DVM

Posted: Thu Mar 4 00:00:00 PST 2004

If you've ever been to a cat shelter, you've probably heard cats sneeze. Cats get their own colds. Two common causes of cat colds, especially in young animals, are herpes virus and calicivirus. Because these respiratory illnesses can quickly become life-threatening if not identified and managed early, it's important to protect your cat from these potentially deadly infections.

HerpesFeline viral rhinotracheitis (FVR), or herpes, causes upper-respiratory infections in cats. This virus is not the same as the herpes virus that humans get. A cat suffering from a respiratory infection cannot infect humans, however herpes is extremely contagious among cats and kittens. Severe infections are fatal if left untreated. Transmission occurs either through the air in a closed environment, such as in a shelter, or through direct cat-to-cat contact. Herpes also can be transmitted from a nursing queen to her kittens if she is actively shedding the virus.

Once infected with herpes, a cat's body never gets rid of it. The virus remains latent in one of the nerves in the head and the cat cannot infect other cats during latent periods. However, during times of stress, the virus becomes active and the cat becomes sick and can then infect other cats.

Sneezing is typically the first sign of a respiratory infection. With herpes this is usually followed by fever, depression, nasal discharge and conjunctivitis (inflammation of the inner lining of the eyelids) with ocular discharge. Cynthia Powell, DVM, a board-certified veterinary ophthalmologist, said herpes typically causes ulcers on the cornea of the eye. "If your cat is squinting and has an ocular discharge, see your vet immediately," Powell said. "If the cat has a corneal ulcer and it remains untreated, in a short time it can lead to a rupture of the eye and loss of vision."

Severe herpes infections cause so much ocular and nasal discharge that the eyes and nose can crust shut. When cats cannot smell their food, they stop eating. They also may resort to breathing through the mouth.

So what can you do if your cat suffers from a herpes outbreak? Julia Veir, DVM, a board-certified veterinary internal medicine specialist, said that supportive care is essential. "You need to maintain hydration, which might mean intravenous fluids in severe cases," she said. "Keep secretions cleaned off the cat's face and humidify the environment. If your cat is not eating well, try warming canned food, or you may have to resort to force-feeding or appetite stimulants from your veterinarian."