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## UPPER RESPIRATORY INFECTIONS

There are several conditions that cause cats to sneeze. However, sneezing that lasts more than two days is probably due to a viral upper respiratory infection (URI), similar to a "cold" that we may have. The "upper" part of the name means that the infection is limited to the nose, throat, trachea, and eyes. Some cats will get only sore, red eyes and others will present for just laryngitis, and these are still manifestations of cat URI's.

Lower respiratory infections involve the lungs; these are relatively uncommon in cats.

### *What causes an URI?*

There are many different viruses and bacteria known to cause feline URI's. Three of these can cause serious illness - resulting in reduced appetite, high fever, and ulcers of the tongue and cornea (surface of the eye). These are the **feline rhinotracheitis virus** (also called feline herpesvirus), the **feline calicivirus**, and **Bordetella** (a bacteria which also causes "kennel cough" in dogs). The remaining viruses cause mild sneezing for a few days but are rarely a serious problem.



### *How serious is this disease?*

1. Uncomplicated viral infection  
Symptoms include sneezing and clear discharge from the nose and eyes. As a rule, the uncomplicated forms of the viral infections are no more serious than the common cold. An uncomplicated viral infection will often resolve on its own. Antibiotics do not have any effect on viruses - the virus just has to run its course.
2. Secondary bacterial infections or *Bordetella* infection  
Symptoms include red, irritated eyes with yellow or green discharge; sneezing with green or yellow discharge from nose; lethargy; loss of appetite. Secondary bacterial infections develop in the nose, oral cavity, or eyes when a virus is present. *Bordetella* is a bacteria that can be present on its own or with a virus. Culture and sensitivity testing helps to determine the type of bacteria and appropriate medication. Antibiotics are used to treat bacterial infections. Sometimes these infections can be extremely difficult to get rid of. Some cats require long term antibiotic therapy and in others the antibiotics are ineffective.

### 3. Chronic disease

Most cats with upper respiratory infection will get better with time and/or antibiotics. A few will have chronic problems. Chronic problems occur for several reasons: the cat's immune system cannot clear the virus; a bacteria is present that is resistant to antibiotics; infection has caused scarring of the tear ducts or nasal passages. These are things that we simply cannot do anything about. A cat that has runny eyes or sneezing from scarring will have these problems for the rest of its life. These cats will also be more prone to developing additional bacterial and viral infections throughout their lives. This may mean frequent trips to the veterinarian and administering various medications.

#### *Is prevention available?*

If the cat has not been previously infected, **vaccination** is usually successful in preventing infection. For cats that are already carriers of these viruses or bacteria, it is still



important to vaccinate. Because immunity from vaccination lasts only about 18-24 months, annual or every 2 year vaccinations are necessary. If a carrier cat should reactivate the virus and begin shedding, periodic vaccination allows the immune system to produce antibodies, which can be readily available to begin fighting the infection. Thus, the cat may still develop an URI, but the consequences will be less severe and the recovery will be faster. Even indoor-only cats should be vaccinated since the viruses are air-borne.

Many cats that have infections due to the rhinotracheitis virus or the calicivirus will become carriers. These cats are typically well, but they will have recurrence of sneezing. They are contagious to other cats when they are shedding the virus. Cats with the calicivirus constantly shed virus and those with rhinotracheitis only shed when stressed.

Supplementing cats with the amino acid **lysine** has been found to help prevent reactivation and shedding of the virus. This product is safe and non-prescription and is recommended for all cats with recurring runny eyes or sneezing. It is available as a powder or gel **Viralys®** which is added to the food daily.