

Upper Respiratory Disease

By Cindy Tittle Moore

Upper respiratory disease ("cold" or "flu"-like symptoms) is generally caused by viral or bacterial infection. Some common causes are feline herpes virus type 1 (FHV-1); feline calicivirus (FCV); and *Chlamydia psittaci* (a bacteria-like organism). In many upper respiratory infections, viral infections are complicated with secondary bacterial infections. Also, one or more viruses may be involved at the same time.

Vaccines for FHV-1, FCV, and *Chlamydia* are available and are generally given as part of the standard kitten shot series. These vaccines protect against systemic infection (symptoms like fever, diarrhea, pneumonia) but they do not give such good protection against local infection of the upper respiratory tract (symptoms like sneezing, runny eyes).

Feline herpesvirus

FHV-1 (previously known as feline rhinotracheitis virus) can cause a variety of different clinical syndromes. The most common symptom is a runny nose and sneezing (rhinitis) which may be combined with reddened, squinting, runny eyes (conjunctivitis). FHV can also cause corneal ulcers, oral ulcers, fever, and diarrhea. In kittens, FHV infection can be severe. FHV is generally transmitted through direct contact or sneezing, and may be transmitted from a mother to her kittens before they are born.

A vet will usually prescribe a broad spectrum antibiotic to clear up secondary bacterial infections, but there is no real cure for the viral infection, just management of it. As in human herpes virus infection, cats may develop a latent infection that causes virus shedding or mild recurrent attacks when the cat is stressed. If you know your cat has had herpes virus infection, try to keep your cat from getting stressed (when that's possible). If he is under stress, he can begin to shed the virus again without showing any signs of being sick himself, which means he may infect other cats. Note that FHV affects only cats. Don't worry, you can't get herpes from your cat!

Feline calicivirus

FCV can also cause a variety of clinical syndromes similar to those caused by FHV. FCV infection is more often associated with oral ulcers, fever, and joint pain, but may also be a contributing factor in rhinitis, conjunctivitis, and gum disease. A vet will usually prescribe a broad spectrum antibiotic to clear up secondary bacterial infections, but there is no real cure for the viral infection. As with FHV, cats may develop a latent infection and may shed virus even though they have no symptoms. Unlike FHV, shedding is not influenced by stress.

Chlamydia psittaci

Chlamydia is a bacteria-like organism that inhabits mucous membranes, primarily the tissues around the eyes (conjunctiva). *Chlamydia* can cause a variety of clinical syndromes similar to those caused by viruses and other organisms. The most common symptom is conjunctivitis, which (unlike that caused by FHV) is generally seen in one eye at first, then spreading to both eyes. *Chlamydia* can also cause rhinitis, fever, pneumonia, and diarrhea. *Chlamydia* infection responds well to topical tetracycline (given as an eye ointment). It is sometimes treated with other topical antibiotics or with

systemic antibiotics (given in pill form). A similar organism, Mycoplasma, also causes conjunctivitis and is treated with antibiotics. Be careful to wash your hands after treating a cat with chlamydiosis, as it is possible for humans to develop a mild form of the disease through contact.