

The people I work with are wonderful. Hard working, dedicated, good humored co-workers make a sometimes stressful work day much more enjoyable. Oh, and did I mention generous? These folks share between themselves more than any group I know. Whether it's afternoon snacks or rides to work (actually, it's mostly the snacks), these folks are remarkably giving. The only down side to all this benevolence is that they also share their cold and Flu bugs. Thanks to a little Flu vaccine shortage problem this is the first year in a long time that we have not had most of our staff immunized for Influenza, and I'm a little nervous.

While animals don't share our cold and Flu viruses with us, our feline friends do have a very similar medical syndrome called Upper Respiratory Infection. The viruses that cause this feline problem are not named "Influenza" but they might as well be. Since we're in the throngs of the human "Flu season" I thought it would be timely to discuss the feline version of this disease.

When doctors talk about the "Upper respiratory tract" we're usually referring to the mouth, nose, and throat, as well as the main airway to the lungs (trachea) and its two main branches (bronchi). The two viruses that frequently infect these tissues in cats are the Feline Rhinotracheitis Virus and the Feline Calici Virus.

The Rhinotracheitis virus is actually a Herpes type virus, but it is specific to cats only and doesn't infect people. Once this virus infects a cat it will cause varying degrees of sneezing, fever, sore throat, and runny eyes and nose. This virus has also been associated with more severe ocular disease and in some cases can be life threatening to newborn kittens.

The Feline Calici Virus, also specific to cats only, will cause an almost identical syndrome as Rhinotracheitis Virus, but can also cause painful sores in the mouth, resulting in poor appetite, and in a few severe cases even spread to the joints, causing lameness. Recently, there was an outbreak of a very potent strain of this virus in Southern California, with some cats becoming very ill, and some even succumbing to the disease despite efforts to save them. Fortunately these cases were isolated, and the infections did not spread beyond the few cats that were affected. To head off any unnecessary worry, it should be noted that the vast majority of cases involving this viral infection are not life threatening.

The incubation period for both these viruses (the time it takes for symptoms to develop after infection) is 2-10 days, and the infection can last from one to four weeks. Cats will usually mount a strong immune response to these viruses and in some cases fully recover. Many cats though will develop what's referred to as a "Chronic Carrier State" These cats *appear* to completely recover from their initial infection and show no outward symptoms but still maintain a low level, or "occult" infection. When stressed or ill from other problems they may begin showing the symptoms of upper respiratory tract disease. I see this frequently with one of my own cats at home. This would explain how isolated, indoor only cats might "catch a cold" without ever coming in contact with other cats. They've actually always had the viral infection-it's just been quiescent.

Bacterial agents can also cause upper respiratory disease in cats. In many cases virus and bacterial factors combine to cause the clinical upper respiratory disease we see so commonly.. We suspect a bacterial component is involved when we see thick, yellow nasal and ocular discharge, along with the sneezing and sore throat.

Treatment for cats with upper respiratory infection is similar to that for people with the Flu or a cold. “Rest, eat right, and get plenty of fluids”-sound familiar? Symptoms resolve once the viral infection runs its course. If a bacterial infection is suspected, antibiotics can help speed the recovery. Additionally, topical eye medications may be prescribed to help with the ocular component of this disease.

In general, upper respiratory infections in cats are rarely a major health problem. When cats do develop more serious problems it's usually when they are not current on their immunizations, or are more vulnerable because they're compromised by other illness.

Prevention, through vaccination, has long been the answer to the upper respiratory infection problem in cats. Immunizations against the Rhinotracheitis and Calici viruses are both safe and effective. Vaccination should start by 2 months of age and continue at regular intervals throughout the life of the cat. One important note: these vaccine programs for upper respiratory infections may not actually prevent your cat from becoming infected with the viruses, but they will very likely help keep any signs of illness to a minimum. This would explain why well-vaccinated cats rarely get serious upper respiratory infections.

So the next time you're laid up in bed with the Flu and your cat jumps up to cuddle with you, don't assume he's just looking for soft, warm place to sleep. My guess is he's sympathetic of your plight and wants to do whatever he can to help. It may be just what the doctor ordered.

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