FELINE UPPER RESPIRATORY INFECTION

FACT SHEET

WHAT IS FELINE UPPER RESPIRATORY INFECTION?

Feline upper respiratory infection, or feline URI as it is commonly known, is a highly contagious disease affecting the nasal passages and sinuses of cats and kittens. It is common in animal shelters, catteries, multiple-cat households, and free-roaming cat populations. Almost all cases of feline URI are caused by infection with one of two viruses: feline herpesvirus (also known as feline rhinotracheitis virus) and feline calicivirus. These two viruses are "species specific," meaning they infect only cats and kittens, not dogs or humans.

HOW IS IT TRANSMITTED?

Feline URI is transferred between cats by fluid discharged from the mouths and noses of infected cats, similar to the transfer of flu virus between humans. Cats can shed the virus through the air by sneezing, coughing, or breathing; or by direct physical contact with cages, toys, food bowls, even the hands and clothes of people handling them. Cats who have previously had the disease are often "silent carriers," meaning they shed the virus and can infect other cats without showing symptoms of the disease themselves.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS?

Symptoms of feline URI include sneezing; fever; runny nose or red, watery eyes; nasal congestion (often seen as drooling or open-mouthed breathing); ulcers on tongue, gums, lips, nose, or roof of mouth; mild to severe depression; and lack of appetite or thirst. Kittens infected with feline calicivirus may develop what is known as "limping kitten syndrome," featuring fever and painful swelling of the joints, especially the joints of the rear legs. Symptoms of feline URI are generally mild at first and worsen within one to three days. The incubation period (the time period between infection and the first signs of illness) lasts from 2 to 17 days. The illness itself typically lasts from one to four weeks, depending on the strength of the cat's immune system.

WHICH CATS GET IT?

Any cat who is stressed by overcrowding, poor nutrition, cold or heat, age, fear, or infection with another disease is susceptible to feline URI. Cats who are especially at risk for infection include unvaccinated cats, kittens (because they have immature immune systems), and cats whose immune systems are compromised by another disease, such as feline leukemia (FeLV), feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV), cancer, malnutrition, or parasites. Recently vaccinated cats who have healthy immune systems are still susceptible to the disease, but symptoms are usually very mild and short-term, usually limited to three to five days of sneezing with no fever and no loss of appetite.

HOW IS FELINE URI TREATED?

Feline URI is easily treatable even though there are no drugs available to kill the feline URI viruses, just as there are no drugs available to treat many human viruses. Treatment of feline URI is aimed at strengthening the cat's body and immune system to help the animal fight the virus, and usually consists of vitamins, good nutrition, and good nursing care. Antibiotics are often prescribed to prevent or treat secondary bacterial infections that may accompany the viral infection. Infected cats may stop eating or drinking, and may require special therapy to combat dehydration and malnutrition. Some cats become sick enough to require hospitalization, and the disease can lead to fatal pneumonia if medical care is not provided. Almost all cats and kittens recover with proper care. A few cats may have chronic (long-lasting) symptoms and some symptoms may recur whenever the cat is stressed or otherwise ill.

HOW IS FELINE URI PREVENTED?

Feline URI cannot be totally prevented in the shelter environment; many cats will enter the shelter already infected, and the stress of being sheltered will lead to full-blown disease and spread of the infection to other cats and kittens. The shelter's goal should be to limit the disease as much as possible, and to strengthen the health of all sheltered cats so that infections are mild and short-lived. Sanitation programs, health evaluation, isolation of sick and injured animals, and preventive health care (vaccinations and deworming) all play a part in the control of feline URI. Many types and brand names of vaccines are available to counter feline URI. The vaccination protocol used should be determined by a veterinarian who is familiar with the special health needs of sheltered cats and kittens and who is familiar with your shelter's environment and its inhabitants.