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Feline Upper Respiratory Disease

"Feline Upper Respiratory Disease Complex" is the term used to describe a condition affecting the mouth, nasal passages, sinuses, and upper airway in cats and kittens. There are multiple causes of the complex, but 80-90% of the cases are caused by feline herpes-1 (also called feline rhinotracheitis virus) and calicivirus. Infections and symptoms by other agents may occur secondarily to an infection with rhinotracheitis virus or calicivirus.

How is feline upper respiratory disease complex spread?

Both feline rhinotracheitis virus and calicivirus are spread through contact with the discharge from the eyes and nose of an infected cat. This usually occurs through direct cat-to-cat contact. Food dishes, hands, bedding, etc., which have been contaminated with infected discharge, can transmit these viruses from one cat to another.

What are the symptoms of feline upper respiratory disease complex?

The symptoms vary depending on which virus/bacteria is the cause, the age of the animal, and other health factors. A summary of the symptoms are summarized below:

- 1-4 weeks duration
- sneezing
- nasal discharge
- eye infections or ulcers
- oral ulcers
- fever
- anorexia
- lethargy
- difficulty breathing
- and in some cases pneumonia

How is feline upper respiratory disease complex diagnosed?

The diagnosis of this disease complex is made based on medical history (e.g., vaccination status and possibility of exposure to an infected cat), clinical signs, and occasionally through special laboratory tests or x-rays to determine the exact cause of disease.

How is feline upper respiratory disease complex treated?

The treatment of cats with this disease complex includes:

- Keeping the eyes and nasal passages clear through regular removal of discharge, increasing the humidity (e.g., placing a vaporizer in the room with the cat), and the possible use of a nasal decongestant prescribed by the veterinarian.

- Ensuring food and water intake - this may be difficult since the nasal symptoms may not allow the cat to smell the food, in which case he usually does not eat. These cats may need to be force fed.
- Keeping the cat quiet and warm.
- Controlling secondary bacterial infections through the use of antibiotics.
- Treating any oral ulcers or eye lesions with appropriate medication.
- Treating with lysine.

Because of the contagious nature of the disease, cats with this disease are generally not hospitalized unless their symptoms are severe. In severe cases, fluid therapy, supplemental oxygen, or a tube placed in the stomach for feeding cats that will not eat may be necessary. Occasionally, in severe refractory cases, anti-virals are implemented.

What is the prognosis for cats with feline upper respiratory disease complex?

The majority of cats will recover from this disease. Most cats will become chronic carriers of the virus. This means they will continue to be infected with the virus but not show any signs of the disease. In the case of rhinotracheitis (herpes-1), cats will often shed the virus in secretions from the eyes and nose after they have been stressed, e.g., boarding, moving, new addition to the household, nursing kittens, etc. Cats with calicivirus will shed the virus continually for years.

How is feline upper respiratory disease complex prevented and controlled?

Vaccination is important, but not 100% effective. Vaccinated cats can still become infected with the wild strain of virus, show mild signs of disease and become carriers of the virus. Try to keep your pet free of stress, provide good nutrition, ensure your pet stays hydrated, and in some cases implement lysine for recurrent offenders.

Disinfection can be achieved by using a dilute bleach solution (1 part bleach: 32 parts water).