

# 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 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 and feline calicivirus. These 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. 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; ulcers on tongue, gums, lips 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 in the rear legs. The symptoms of feline URI are generally mild at first and worsen within one to three days. The incubation period lasts from 2 to 17 days. The illness itself typically lasts from one to four weeks.

## **Which cats are at Risk?**

Any cat that is stressed by overcrowding, poor nutrition, cold or heat, age, or fear is susceptible to feline URI. Cats that are especially at risk for infection include unvaccinated cats and kittens. Recently vaccinated cats that have healthy immune systems are still susceptible to the disease, but symptoms are usually mild and short-term.

## **How is feline URI treated?**

Feline URI is easily treatable even though there are no drugs available to kill the feline URI virus, just as there are no drugs available to treat many human viruses. Treatment is aimed at strengthening the cat’s body and immune system to help the animal fight the virus. 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 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 sheltered cats so that infections are mild and short-lived. Sanitation programs, isolation of sick, and preventive health care all play a part in the control of feline URI.