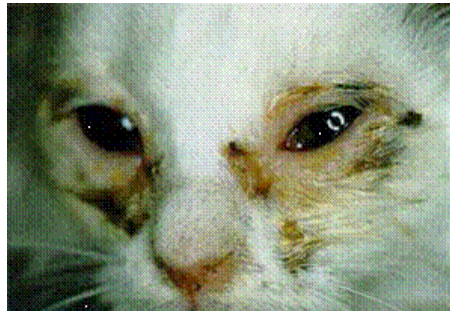


Don't forget the Flu Jab!

Poor Archie was a sorry state when he came out of his cat box and just sat there on the table. Normally he might have been off round the room, jumping on to the work surfaces, to investigate every nook and cranny. Today his eyes were streaming and his nose was blocked and he must have felt ghastly. On examination he had ulcers in his mouth, a high temperature, sore eyes and he was struggling to breathe.

Poor Archie had cat flu, or upper respiratory infection (URI), which is a very common disease that can vary considerably in severity, and on occasions can even be life threatening.



Archie had the typical eye and nasal discharges of cat flu

In the vast majority of cases, disease results from infection with viruses called **feline calicivirus (FCV)** or **feline herpes virus (FHV, or FHV-1)**. Clinical signs include sneezing, nasal discharge, conjunctivitis (inflammation of the lining of the eyes), ocular discharge, loss of appetite, fever and depression. Mouth ulcers, coughing, excessive drooling of saliva and eye ulcers may also be seen. Very young, very old and immunosuppressed cats are more likely to develop severe disease and possibly die as a result of their URI, usually due to secondary infections (such as pneumonia), lack of nutrition and dehydration.

The incubation period following infection with FCV or FHV is usually just a few days (2-10 days). After this, typical clinical signs develop which include:

- [Sneezing
- [Nasal discharge
- [Ocular discharge
- [Lethargy
- [Inappetence
- [Fever

Although FCV and FHV are viral infections, secondary infection with bacteria is common and can contribute to rhinitis (infection in the nose) conjunctivitis, and even lung infections. While most cats will recover from URIs, on occasions they can be life-threatening, and with severe infections the recovery may take several weeks. Some cats may also be left with permanent damage within the nose and may have persistent or recurrent nasal discharge (so-called 'chronic rhinitis'). In rare cases, a much more severe and often fatal form of FCV infection may occur.

Treatment of URIs is largely symptomatic and supportive. Antibiotics are indicated to treat secondary bacterial infections and to try to reduce the damage the infection causes. If nasal congestion is severe and breathing is difficult your vet may also suggest steam inhalation or nebulisation which make discharges more liquid and more easily relieved by sneezing.

Affected cats are often reluctant to eat – they will have a poor sense of smell and eating may also be uncomfortable. Using soft, highly aromatic foods (for example kitten foods, fish in oil) that are gently warmed will help to tempt an inappetent cat. However, if anorexia is severe your cat may require hospitalisation for your vet to provide food via a feeding tube. This can be important, as poor nutrition will significantly contribute to disease and slow down healing. Intravenous fluids may also be needed if your cat is not drinking properly, to avoid dehydration. Painkillers may also be required and sometimes anti-viral agents may be needed.

General nursing is also essential – discharges from the eyes and nose should be gently wiped away using damp cotton wool, and the cat should be kept warm and comfortable.

Most cats that recover from infection with URI viruses will become 'carriers'. Carrier cats usually show no sign of illness but, may shed virus in saliva, tears and nasal secretions, especially when stressed, and can be a source of infection to other cats. Other cats can become infected by contact with an infected ill cat, by contact with a carrier shedding virus or by contact with the virus on clothes, bowls etc as it can last in the environment for many days.

Fortunately there are steps you can take to protect your cat from this horrid illness. The risk of URIs can be dramatically reduced by vaccination against FHV and FCV. *These vaccines are important for all cats*, irrespective of how they are kept (even if kept totally indoors), as the diseases are so widespread. Although vaccination usually prevents severe disease developing, it cannot always prevent infection occurring and so mild disease may still develop in some cats. FCV has many different strains, and this can cause further problems with vaccination as vaccines will not necessarily work against all these strains. Newer FCV vaccines contain more than one strain in the vaccine to help overcome this problem. This is not an issue with FHV as only one virus strain exists.

So don't let your cat become like Archie. Talk to your Veterinary Surgeon now about vaccinating your cat before it is too late. Prevention really is better than cure!

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