

Feline Upper Respiratory Tract Disease

Sniffing, sneezing cat? Upper respiratory disease is very common in cats and we certainly see our fair share here at the clinic with a long list of possible underlying causes. We can begin to narrow it down based on the cat's age, vaccine history, whether they are indoor or outdoor, how long it's been going on, and whether or not they are showing any other signs of illness. Try to think about whether you've started using a new air freshener, diffuser, scented candles, or if there is smoking in the home, as these can all be important considerations.

If your cat does have signs of upper respiratory disease, make sure to look closely at their appetite and activity level, as these can give an indication as to how much intervention is likely to be needed and how quickly. Take note of any coughing, open-mouthed breathing, or increased abdominal effort while breathing, as none of these are normal in a cat! Take a look at your cat's gums- they should be pale pink, not purple, blue, or bright red. Take your cat's resting respiratory rate- wait until they are sleeping, count how many breaths they take in 15 seconds, and multiply this number by four to get the number of breaths per minute. Anything under 36 is normal.

One of the most common causes of upper respiratory disease, especially in young cats is feline herpesvirus. Up to 97% of the cat population has been exposed during their lifetime. Feline herpesvirus is contagious between cats, mostly by direct contact, but does not affect humans. Herpesvirus causes nasal discharge, sneezing, and sometimes watery red eyes. Herpesvirus infection is usually not serious, but secondary complications can sometimes arise such as bacterial infections, eye ulcers, or pneumonia. Cats affected by herpesvirus usually recover and carry it for the rest of their lives with no obvious signs. During times of stress, these cats that are normally symptom-free may develop a runny nose, sneezing, and eye symptoms again. Cats with herpesvirus do not always need to be treated, but it is a good idea to give us a call so that we can assess the severity of your cat's clinical signs. This is especially important if there could be something more serious going on.