

FELINE HERPESVIRUS (FHV) INFECTION IN CATS.



What Causes It

Feline herpesvirus (FHV, FHV-1) is a highly contagious virus that is one of the major causes of upper respiratory infections (URIs) in cats.

This virus is widespread and causes disease in cats all over the world. Together, FHV and feline calicivirus cause the vast majority of URIs in cats, including cat flu.

How is it Transmitted

Feline herpesvirus (FHV) is a virus that mainly causes acute upper respiratory infections (URIs) in cats, although it has been associated with some other diseases. The virus is readily transmitted between cats through:-

- Direct contact - through contact with saliva and discharge from the eyes and nose.
- Inhaling sneeze droplets
- Sharing of food bowls and litter trays
- A contaminated environment (including bedding and other equipment) - this is less important with FHV than FCV, because the virus is fragile and can probably only survive for 1-2 days in the environment.

After infection, because the virus will still exist in nerve cells, cats can become life-long carriers of the virus. In many cats this causes no problems, and they do not continue to be infectious and are not a risk to others. However, some cats will occasionally shed the virus again, usually following episodes of stress or when the cat's immune system is suppressed (e.g., following the use of corticosteroids). When virus is shed again, some cats will also develop mild reoccurrence of clinical signs. Additionally, persistent FHV infection can cause eye problems.

Which Cats Are At Risk?

Cats living in a colony are most susceptible, because the virus is so infectious.

Signs and Symptoms.

The most common signs are:-

- Acute upper respiratory infection, typical signs include:-
 - sneezing,
 - discharge from the eyes and nose,
 - conjunctivitis,
 - ulcers on the tongue,
 - lethargy,
 - lack of appetite
 - fever.
 - Sometimes coughing

Keratitis - although rarely seen, one result of chronic (long-term) FHV infection is keratitis, the infection and inflammation of the cornea.

- FHV-associated dermatitis - is a rare condition associated with long-term FHV infection and results in the development of skin inflammation and ulcers, usually seen around the nose and mouth, but can affect other areas such as the front legs. This is only seen rarely.

Signs may last from a few days to a few weeks and the cat can be infectious for around 3 weeks.

The disease is generally more severe than that seen with FCV.

Diagnosis

In most cases, a specific diagnosis of FHV infection will not be necessary. The typical signs of URI is enough to diagnose FHV (and/or feline calicivirus - FCV) infection.

If a specific diagnosis is required, eye or oral swabs can be taken and sent to a veterinary laboratory where the virus can be detected and identified.

Treatment

FHV infections are frequently complicated by secondary bacterial infections, so treatment with antibiotics is usually necessary to eradicate these.

Good nursing care is critical and in severe cases, cats may need to be given intravenous fluid and special food.

Nebulisers and inhaling steam could help in cases of severe nasal congestion.

Unlike FCV, with FHV infection certain anti-viral drugs are available and can be very helpful in managing the clinical symptoms resulting from the disease.

Prevention.

Vaccination for FHV is important for all cats. Two or three injections are recommended in kittens, starting at around 12 weeks of age. Cats should receive a booster at a year old, and after that should receive further booster vaccinations every 1-3 years.

Vaccination does not necessarily prevent infection with FHV but will greatly reduce the severity of clinical disease. In colonies of cats, any cat showing clinical signs should be isolated if at all possible, and strict hygiene should be ensured with disinfection, and use of separate feeding bowls, litter trays, implements and equipment. Hands should be carefully washed and disposable aprons and gloves, should be used.

Unlike FCV, there is only one strain of FHV, so vaccination is not complicated by the existence of different strains.

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Prevention is covered fully in the **"PREVENTION OF DISEASES IN CATS"** section above