



Feline Herpesvirus

(Feline Viral Rhinotracheitis)



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Herpesvirus infection, also known as feline viral rhinotracheitis (FVR), is an infectious disease caused by feline herpesvirus type 1 (FHV-1). Feline herpesvirus is species specific and highly contagious. The virus is only known to cause infections in domestic and wild cats, infecting cats of all ages. Feline herpesvirus is a major cause of upper respiratory disease in cats; and it is the most common cause of conjunctivitis (inflammation of the tissues surrounding the eye).

How does a cat become infected with feline herpesvirus?

The most common way for the herpes virus to spread is through contact with discharge from an infected cat's eyes, mouth or nose. A cat becomes infected with the virus by direct contact with virus particles. Therefore, an infection occurs when a susceptible cat comes into contact with an infected cat, or comes into contact with inanimate objects (food and water dishes, furniture, litter trays, clothing, blankets, toys) that have been contaminated with viral particles. Cats can also catch the virus by mutual grooming.

It is worthwhile to note that an infected pregnant cat might also pass the virus on to kittens who are still in the womb. Because the virus is highly contagious, it is widespread in catteries, shelters and multi-cat households.

Which cats are prone to the herpesvirus?

Cats of all sizes, ages and breeds are susceptible to feline herpesvirus. However, cats in crowded or stressful conditions or with weak immune systems often develop more severe symptoms, as can kittens, Persian cats and other flat-face breeds. Kittens born to a cat that is carrying a latent FVR infection may become infected after birth. In these kittens, symptoms usually develop several weeks after birth, and the infection can be serious.



Once a cat becomes infected, they will usually show disease symptoms in 2-5 days (incubation period of the disease). The cat can infect other cats during the incubation period, and in most instances once symptoms appear the active infection last about 10-20 days. All cats that have been infected with FHV will become carriers of the virus. Most carriers will be latent, meaning that the virus will survive in an inactive form within the cat's body. Stress and illness can cause the virus to become reactivated.

What are the symptoms of feline herpesvirus infection?

Discharge from the nose and eyes	Sneezing	Conjunctivitis	Pink eye (inflammation of the eyelid)		
Ocular pain	Lesions in and around the eyes	Eye ulcers	Squinting	Fever	Congestion
Drooling	Depression	Loss of appetite	Lethargy	In kittens, fatal pneumonia may occur	

The clinical sign of FHV infection (FVR) vary from mild to severe. Milder forms of the disease may clear with time, while more severe forms can lead to chronic, recurrent infection and more painful disease. Cats weakened by the virus may also develop secondary infections.

How is the infection diagnosed?

Diagnosis can be challenging and is often based primarily on history, physical examination, lab tests and ophthalmic examination. Corneal staining is often performed to check for ulcers. Specific identification of the virus particles may be made by collecting samples of cells and discharges from nose, eyes, or back of the throat. Identification of feline herpesvirus DNA by PCR testing in laboratory is the most sensitive test available for diagnosing infection by FHV-1. Unfortunately, if the disease is not in the active stage, testing is usually not rewarding.

Treatment and Prognosis

Therapy for feline herpesvirus infection is tailored to the cat and its clinical signs. Sadly, there is not a single consistently effective treatment for FHV. Supportive therapy, including fluid therapy and good nursing care are of utmost importance. Veterinarians may prescribe oral antibiotics or antiviral medications to help ease the symptoms, and topical antiviral drops or creams may be used for conjunctivitis or other eye irritation. The treatment is focused on reducing or stopping viral replication and keeping the cat comfortable.

Prognosis varies. Some cats never develop clinical disease after the initial FHV infection while others may have chronic and frequent flare-ups. There is NO cure for herpesvirus infections. The therapeutic goal is to reduce the frequency and severity of recurrences. With medication, good nutrition and tender loving care, most cats will make a successful recovery and lead normal lives.

Prevention

All healthy cats should be vaccinated using an FHV containing vaccine (core vaccine component). Talk to your veterinarian about what vaccines are available to protect your cat from this virus. The standard core vaccines include a vaccine against feline herpesvirus/feline viral rhinotracheitis which will not fully prevent infection from occurring if your cat is exposed to the virus, but it will significantly reduce the severity of infection and will shorten the length of the illness.

[Please make sure to discuss with your veterinarian the specifics of your situation to receive proper advice on the recommended booster schedule for your individual cat.](#)