What is Cat Flu?

Cat flu is the common name for Feline Infectious Upper Respiratory Tract Disease. Cat flu is incredibly common; pretty much every cat will have a bout of cat flu at some point in their life. The viruses that cause cat flu are cat specific they do not cause flu in humans, nor can human flu cause symptoms in cats.

What causes Cat flu?

Cat flu can be caused by a variety of different infections, much like the common cold in people. By far the commonest causes are the viruses Feline Herpes Virus and Feline Calicivirus. They account for about 90% of infections. There are a number of other bugs that can be associated with infection as well, including Bordatella bronchiseptica and Chlamydophila felis.

What are the symptoms of Cat Flu?

- Sneezing
- Gunky eyes
- Snotty nose
- Inappetance
- Lethargy
- Mouth ulcers
- Fever
- Sore throat / lost voice, sometimes look like there’s something stuck in their throat

Some cats only suffer very mild symptoms, recovering on their own within a couple of days, whilst other cats can suffer much more severely.

Herpes Virus can lie dormant in cats for long periods of time, becoming active again when the cat is stressed or its immune system is compromised, a lot like cold sores in people which are also caused by a herpes virus. Any kind of stressful event such as going to the cattery is enough to precipitate a bout of cat flu.

How is Cat Flu spread?

Cat Flu, much like human colds, is very easy to spread! It spreads not only by direct contact with an affected cat, but even just by contacting something that infectious cat has been around. The infection is easily spread in saliva, nasal and ocular discharges and it can survive well in the environment (eg on food bowls, bedding, clothing) for up to 10 days. Normally 2-10 days after coming into contact with the infection symptoms develop. Once a cat has recovered from infected it often becomes a “carrier”. Carrier cats do not show any symptoms, but can remain infectious for long periods of time after they’ve had cat flu. Cats with herpes virus are normally carriers for life, shedding virus intermittently at times of stress. Cats with calicivirus can be carriers for a couple of years before getting rid of it, shedding virus constantly.
How is Cat Flu diagnosed?

Your vet will normally diagnose cat flu based on your cat’s symptoms and clinical exam. It is not normally that important to confirm a diagnosis with lab tests, but if necessary we can send swabs from the mouth or nose off to the lab.

How is Cat Flu treated?

There isn’t really a specific treatment for Cat Flu, much like for colds in people. The majority of cats actually recover on their own within a week or so just with a bit of TLC, but each case is different and sometimes we do need to prescribe medication:

**Antivirals** - are available for cats, but are very expensive and not normally necessary

**Antibiotics** - are occasionally necessary for some cats to treat secondary bacterial infections. In cases where we suspect Chlamydophila (normally the symptoms are slightly different to “typical cat flu”), a specific antibiotic called Ronaxan are often used.

**Decongestants** - Cats hate it when they can’t breathe through their nose. They rely heavily on their sense of smell to stimulate appetite, if they can’t smell they won’t eat. We sometimes give Bisolvin to ease congestion, or you could just try sitting you cat in a nice steamy bathroom.

**Eye Drops** - Cat Flu sometimes causes eye ulcers (damage to the cornea, the clear part at the front of the eye). These often just need time to heal themselves, but we will normally give an antibiotic eye drop to prevent any secondary infection making things worse.

**Anti-inflammatories** - Just as you or I would take paracetamol or ibuprofen if we have a cold, some cats benefit from an anti-inflammatory to make them more comfortable and bring their temperature down. **PLEASE NOTE** human paracetamol/ibuprofen/aspirin etc are dangerous to use in cats, please only use medication prescribed by your vet.

**TLC** - Most cats just need a bit of TLC whilst they make their own recovery. Wipe away any nasal or ocular discharge with damp cotton wool. Offer smelly food like sardines. Offer soft food rather than dry food. Warm food in the microwave. You can sit your cat in a warm steamy bathroom, or sit them by a bowl of warm water with olive oil or vicks in it (just make sure they don’t drink it!) Some cats can be very ill with cat flu and need hospitalisation and intensive care.

Can Cat Flu be prevented?

Our standard annual cat vaccine protects against Feline Herpes Virus and Feline Calicivirus. There are also vaccines available against Chlamydophila and Bordatella, available if requested. Vaccination is important even for indoor cats because the viruses are so easily carried on clothing etc into your home. There are so many different strains of Calicivirus it’s impossible to vaccinate against all of them;
vaccinated cats can still get mild cat flu. Vaccines help limit the severity of the disease but do not prevent disease.

Limiting spread from infected cats can be difficult. If possible they should be isolated from other cats, eg confined to one room, with separate food bowls, litter tray etc. Think about changing your shoes in that room, wearing rubber gloves and an apron, to try and limit contamination. Normal household cleaners are generally enough to kill the infectious particles. Ideally new kittens should be kept separate from other cats in the house until they are fully vaccinated.

If you have any other questions about cat flu or would like to book your cat in for vaccinations, please contact us on 01527 831 616