Cat Flu

Cause

Cat flu is a disease we see often in cats, despite there being a vaccination available. Unlike in humans cat flu is not a single infectious agent. In humans flu is cause by the influenza virus, this is a virus that infects the respiratory tract of humans.

Cat flu can be caused by up to 10 different viruses and bacteria either on their own or in combination, which affect the respiratory tract, nose, eyes and mouths of cat.

Although there are many different viruses and bacteria that can cause cat flu, Feline herpes virus and Feline calicivirus make up over 80% of the cases.

Symptoms

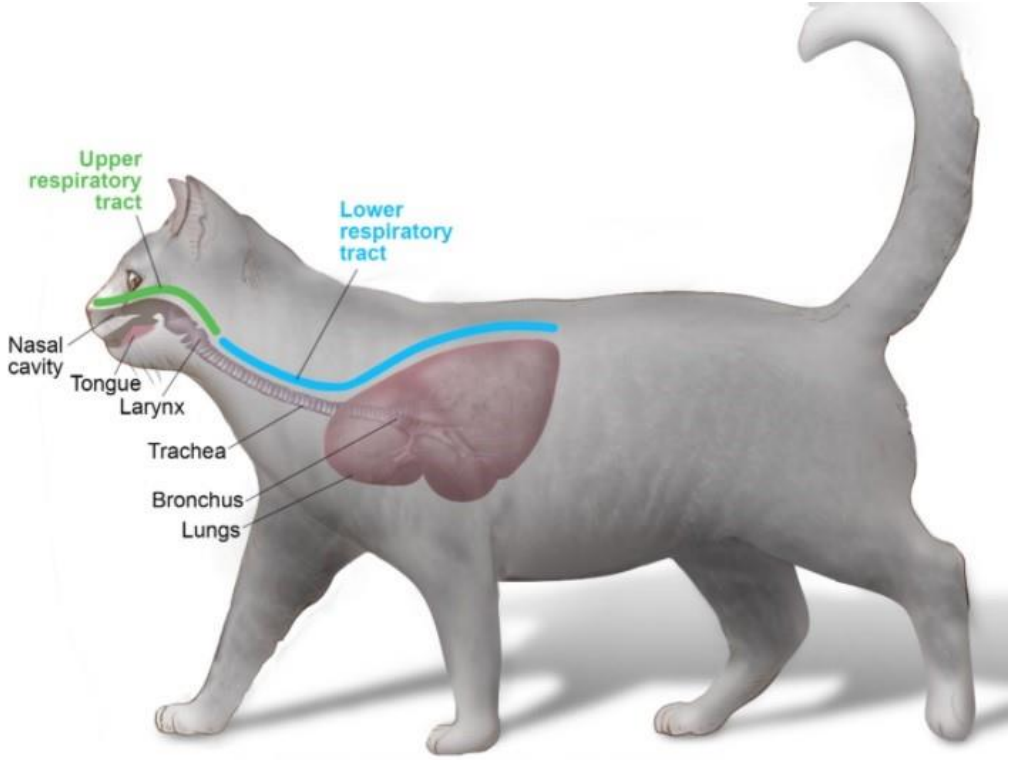
The symptoms of cat flu can vary according to the age of the cat, the underlying health and stress levels, and the organism causing the flu, but common symptoms include sneezing, coughing, discharge from the nose and eyes, not eating, fever, conjunctivitis, ulceration, pneumonia, and in severe cases death.

Feline herpes virus is more commonly associated with coughing, nasal discharge and conjunctivitis, it tends to be the more severe form of cat flu and in old, very young, or otherwise compromised cats can be life threatening.

Feline Calicivirus tends to be a milder form, but is often associated with ulceration, especially in the mouth and on the nose which can be painful and prevent eating.

Epidemiology (how it spreads)

Cat flu is a very infectious disease, and can spread through direct contact, droplets, and indirect contact, some of the viruses can live for weeks in the environment and can be resistant to disinfectants.



Cat flu can also spread through fomites, a fomite is an object that can carry the virus or bacteria for a time until it infects another individual. In human epidemiology, door knobs, phones, pens and bannisters are common fomites.

Once infected with a cat flu virus, many cats will not completely clear the virus and become permanent carriers, this is particularly true of herpes virus. The human herpes virus is the cause of cold sores, and the virus works in a similar way in both species. When first infected symptoms develop (cats have cat flu, humans have a cold sore), when recovery happens the symptoms resolve, but the virus hides away in the local nerves (the trigeminal ganglion), in times of stress the virus can represent and symptoms recur again (cats get flu, humans get a cold sore).

Treatment

There is no cure for cat flu, but there are treatments to help relieve symptoms and promote recovery, most of the treatment is nursing care and includes:

- Nebulising or steaming (allowing the cat to breath in a cool steam helps to sooth the nose and throat and clear material that may be blocking the way)
- Encouraging food and water intake, often using very wet food and warmed food
- Mucolytics (medicines that break up mucus), Decongestants, ulcer medications in the form of eyedrops, or oral liquids; and
- In severe cases antibiotics and anti-virals are sometimes needed

Prevention

Vaccination is the best prevention, but unfortunately while the vaccination can prevent the disease, it does not prevent infection or carrier status. Because cat flu vaccinations do not prevent carrier status in cats we don't get the benefit of herd immunity this is why it is important to maintain vaccinations in cats.

If previously infected vaccinations can still help, they can prevent infection with the other causes of cat flu, however as stress is the primary cause of cat flu recurrence avoiding stress and respiratory tract irritation are important.

Anti-anxiety products like feliway and zylkene can help to prevent cat flu during times of stress like house moving, cat boarding or even vet visits.

Wishing you all good health,

Dr Tony