Why is my cat sneezing?

After 4 weeks off for my wedding and honeymoon, I returned to find my 9 month old Siberian Forest Cat, Ziva, with intermittent sneezing and conjunctivitis of her left eye. It broke my heart and made me feel like a terrible cat mother, but is actually a very common presentation of cats with what is commonly known as "cat flu".

What is cat flu

"Cat flu" is an upper respiratory disease caused by a feline strain (no, it can't infect humans) of Herpes virus (FHV1), acting alone or in combination with other viruses.

The virus attacks the nasal cavity, tonsils, eyes and trachea, leading to symptoms such as sneezing (often the first sign), discharge from the eyes and nose, coughing, conjunctivitis and sometimes ulcers in the mouth. Some cats will have a fever, be lethargic and go off their food.

The virus is spread mostly through aerosolised virus from nasal discharge, or from direct contact between cats. It is very contagious, which is why young cats are often infected as kittens in high density catteries or shelters.

Once infected, and even once the symptoms resolve, the virus stays in the body (sitting in the nerve ganglion) and is reactivated in times of "stress", when a cat's immune system is reduced.

"Stress" for cats can mean pretty much anything that is outside of their daily routine - this is why we often see resurgence of cat flu symptoms when owners go away, move house, add another cat to the household, have a baby etc.

A common scenario (like my own) is returning from holiday to find your cat sneezing. As many cats are boarded in cat boarding facilities, it is easy to assume that the cat was infected by another cat in the facility. Though this is certainly possible, the more common scenario is that a cat has an underlying FHV1 infection (usually from kittenhood) that is reactivated due to the "stress" of the owner going away and being in a novel environment.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis is typically based on clinical signs of upper respiratory tract disease in a young, elderly or otherwise immune compromised cat, especially one that has recently undergone a "stressful" event.

Treatment

Cat flu is a virus, meaning that treatment for mild cases is generally not required. It is usually "self limiting" - meaning that the cat or kitten’s immune system is able to clear the disease within 10-14 days.

We can, however, manage some of the symptoms with various medications and supportive care:
Keep eyes and nose clean with warm swabs to remove excess discharge;
L-Lysine is a supplement which may help to reduce severity and duration of symptoms;
Antibiotic eye drops if conjunctivitis or eye ulcers are present;
Antivirals such as Famciclovir can be useful if symptoms are particularly severe;

"Nebulisation" - an easy way to do this is to place the cat in humidified bathroom to open up nasal passages;
Offer warm, flavoursome food to encourage eating.

Treatment with oral antibiotics is generally only indicated if symptoms persists beyond 2 weeks or are severe eg if there is white (purulent) discharge from the nose, a persistent cough or a fever, or the cat is completely off his/her food, as these signs may indicate a secondary bacterial infection.

Prevention

Annual cat vaccinations protect against viruses involved in the cat flu disease. They are likely to limit clinical signs and recurrence of symptoms, but will not completely prevent the risk of infection.

Reducing stress by limiting changes for your cat (where possible) and using a natural anxiolytic such as Zylkene when changes are inevitable can also help to reduce symptom recurrence.

While cats are showing clinical signs of illness, we also recommend keeping them away from other cats and boarding facilities.

Clinical signs can range from minor (like little Ziva on the left with clear discharge around the eye), to severe, with mucopurulent discharge like the poor creature on the right.

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