

Upper Respiratory Infections

What is an upper respiratory infection and why are animals from shelters so susceptible?

In a typical shelter, many animals are taken in every day, some of whom have never received proper health care and many of whom are already carrying infectious diseases. Feline upper respiratory infection (URI) and canine “kennel cough” are the animal equivalents of a human cold or flu infection, and these diseases often affect sheltered dogs, cats, puppies, and kittens. They are “species specific” and, therefore, cannot infect humans.



Feline URI and canine kennel cough are usually mild diseases that can be easily treated. Without treatment, however, they can severely debilitate an animal and even lead to fatal pneumonia. Animals who have been subjected to overcrowding, poor nutrition, extreme heat or cold, fear, or infection with another disease before being admitted to the shelter are more susceptible to these illnesses and may develop more severe symptoms. Even if animals are vaccinated against these infectious diseases as soon as they enter the shelter, vaccines may take up to two weeks to provide protection from disease and many animals are infected prior to entering the shelter.

What are the symptoms I should look for in my new cat or dog?

In cats and kittens, the signs of feline URI may include sneezing, fever, runny nose, red or watery eyes, nasal congestion (often seen as drooling or open-mouthed breathing), ulcers on the tongue, lips nose, or roof of mouth, lack of appetite or thirst, and lack of energy. Dogs and puppies affected with canine kennel cough often have a hacking or honking cough, sometimes followed by gagging. Some dogs and puppies may have only a runny nose. Without veterinary care they may become lethargic, run a fever, and lose their appetite.

What should I do if my new pet has these symptoms?

Take your new pet to the vet as soon as possible. If you have a young puppy or kitten or an adult pet that has stopped eating, then you need to take them to the vet immediately – **DO NOT WAIT!**

What can I do to help my pet get well?

Follow the veterinarian’s instructions. Use all medications exactly as prescribed, even if your pet’s condition seems to have improved. Encourage your pet to rest as much as possible by providing a quiet, warm place for them to relax. This is not a good time to introduce your animal to family members or other pets in the household. You should also refrain from taking pet dogs out for neighborhood walks. Provide food as recommended by your vet and encourage your pet to eat. You can try warming a high-quality canned food to stimulate their appetite. Gently wipe any discharge from the eyes and nose with a warm, damp towel. To help ease the discomfort of a congested cat, use a vaporizer or place the cat in the bathroom and run hot water in the shower for a few minutes each day. Provide lots of love and above all else, be patient with your pet. Your new companion will be ready to join in your normal family activities soon.

San Bernardino County
Animal Care & Control Program
(800) 472-5609
www.sbcounty.gov/acc

