

Upper Respiratory Infections in Shelter Animals

What is an Upper Respiratory Infection (URI)?

Also known as URI, it is a common shelter illness that, while primarily affecting cats, can affect many different species. It is a viral or a bacterial infection that targets the upper airways (nose and throat) and is similar to a common cold. In most cases, a round of medication will address the illness, but in more severe cases your foster pet may need additional treatment. URIs are commonly passed through saliva and nasal discharge via direct contact (grooming, coming nose-to-nose with sick animals, ect) and indirectly (sneezing, eating from the same bowls, touching a surface that has discharge on it, ect).

What are the symptoms of URI?

The most common symptoms of URI are frequent sneezing and coughing, nasal congestion, and colored (yellow or green) nasal discharge. Conjunctivitis (inflammation of the membranes lining the eyelids) can also occur with colored ocular discharge. Depending on the severity of the URI, they may have bloody nasal discharge (though this is less common), drooling, nausea, mouth sores, decreased or total loss of appetite, and decreased activity levels.

My foster is showing signs of URI, what should I do?

The occasional sneeze here and there is perfectly normal and not cause for concern, as animals sneeze like humans do to expel foreign matter from the nasal passage. If you notice persistent or worsening symptoms, please notify us within 24 hours for animals under 5 months, and within 48 hours for adults. In order to avoid the added stress of coming back to the shelter, we may ask you to send us a video of their sneezing and/or breathing, or pictures of the eyes if ocular discharge, swelling, or squinting of the eyes is noted.

How is it treated?

We prescribe an oral antibiotic that is to be given once daily. If they also have conjunctivitis with their URI, we prescribe an eye ointment to be put onto the affected eyes every 12 hours for 7 days. If they still are sneezing and congested after their oral meds are finished, we will do another round of medication(s).

If their noses are raw or plugged up with nasal discharge, a warm, wet wash cloth can be used to gently wipe their noses and help them breathe better. You can also take them into a steamy bathroom to help clear up their sinuses.

How can I give the oral medication?

See your “How to Administer Medications” hand-out for more help. You can also email our Foster Veterinary Technician directly at sanderson@hswestmi.org, if you are still struggling with administering the medication.

My foster animal was healthy when I took them home, why are they getting sick now?

The virus can incubate in animals for 2-10 days before they develop symptoms. Stress, such as changes in the environment, the busy shelter, traveling in a car, or surgery, can cause them to be more susceptible to the URI, and we often see them break with illness after these events. If they had a recent visit to the shelter, like a vaccine booster appointment, it's also possible to be exposed during that appointment as well, despite our efforts to clean thoroughly between each animal.

I have my own animals at home. Are they at risk for getting sick too?

When you bring foster animals home, we ask you to quarantine them in a room away from your personal animals for 10 days. If the foster animal has an underlying illness, chances are they will show symptoms within those 10 days. If your animals are up-to-date on vaccines, it decreases their chances of getting sick, but does not make them completely immune to all strains of illnesses. As long as your animals are kept separate from foster animals and you practice good hygiene, sanitation, and hand washing, the risk of getting your personal animals sick is minimal. If your personal animal(s) get sick, you will need to go to your primary veterinarian for an exam and possible treatment.

Can I catch this illness?

No- it cannot be passed onto humans or between species!