



## Upper Respiratory Infection (URI) in Kittens and Cats

Upper Respiratory Infection (URI) is very common in kittens and cats. URIs can cause varying degrees of symptoms in the eyes, nose, and mouth/throat. Sneezing, nasal discharge, eye discharge, and congestion are almost always seen. Kittens and cats who are very sick may stop eating. Younger kittens may stop nursing. Kittens and cats may become lethargic, which means weakness and lack of energy. They may develop fevers, or they may have low body temperatures. URI can even progress to bacteria spreading into a kitten's bloodstream, which can lead to "Fading Kitten Syndrome" and death in kittens that are 4 weeks old or younger. It is important to know what symptoms to look out for and when veterinary attention is needed. Early intervention in care can help prevent worsening of symptoms and expedite recovery.

### URI Overview

- People cannot get a URI from a kitten or cat, nor can a kitten or cat get one from a human.
- The primary causes of URIs are herpesvirus and calicivirus. These viral infections are often complicated by secondary bacterial infections.
- Orphaned kittens are particularly susceptible to viruses that cause URI because they don't have immunity from nursing their mother's milk, and because they are under stress from being orphaned.
- Younger kittens are also more susceptible. Kittens with URI that are 2-3 weeks old often do not survive, compared to kittens that are 4-6 weeks or older.
- Immunocompromised kittens and cats with feline leukemia virus or feline immunodeficiency virus and geriatric cats are also more susceptible, and they often have more severe URI's.
- Extra precautions should be taken with orphaned kittens, kittens younger than 4 weeks, immunocompromised kittens and cats, and geriatric cats to reduce their exposure to upper respiratory infection.
- Kittens and cats get URI from other kittens and cats in the environment, via direct contact of eye, nose and mouth secretions. Even cats that appear to be healthy and free of signs of illness can still be shedding viruses.

- It is important to note that in kittens and cats, URI is not spread via airborne transmission. So, although a kitten or cat sneeze can travel as far as four feet, those sneeze droplets in the air are not going to spread URI.
- URI is also spread through contamination of people's hands and clothing, of surfaces and bedding, and of fur. This makes it very important for people to wash their hands and change their clothing in between handling different kittens and cats, and to regularly clean and disinfect the environment that kittens and cats are housed in.
- Regardless of the method by which a kitten or cat is exposed, it takes less than a week for the virus to "incubate" inside the body before signs of illness are seen.
- Recovery time in kittens and cats with URI varies by the severity of the URI that they had and whether there were any secondary complications. They can recover as quickly as 7-10 days or it may take 3 or more weeks.

## URI Symptoms

- Sneezing
- Nasal Discharge
- Congestion, Difficult or Labored Breathing
- Conjunctivitis (swelling and redness of the white part of the eyes and inner part of the eyelids)
- Eye Discharge
- Eye Squinting or Excessive Eye Blinking
- Corneal Ulcers (sores on the surface of the clear part of the eye)
- Oral Ulcers (sores on the inside of the mouth, including the tongue)
- Nasal Ulcers (sores on the outside of and/or the inside of the nose)
- Lethargy (weakness or lack of energy)
- Fever or low body temperature
- Decreased appetite or not eating/not nursing



## Guidelines for When Veterinary Care is Needed

- See the Maddie's Kitten and Cat URI Scoring Chart. This chart has a list of all the above symptoms with varying scores that are assigned based on severity. This chart will help you figure out how urgent it is to seek veterinary care for your kitten or cat. But please keep in mind that this chart is only a guideline. It is always better to be safe than sorry where your kittens and cats are concerned.
- Any Score of 4 based on this chart means that your kitten or cat needs emergency care immediately.
- Any Severe Score of 3 on this chart means that unless your kitten or cat starts to improve, he or she needs veterinary care within the next 12-24 hours.
- Any Moderate Score of 2 on this chart means that unless your kitten or cat starts to improve, he or she needs veterinary care within the next 1-2 days.
- If all the scores on this chart are Mild at 1, this means that you should continue to monitor your kitten or cat, and that no veterinary care is needed now.

## How to Care for a Kitten or Cat with URI

- Keep a copy of the Maddie's Kitten and Cat URI Scoring Chart where you can easily refer to it. Monitor your kitten's or cat's symptoms at least several times daily, and seek veterinary care as needed.
- Keep your kitten's or cat's nose and eye areas clean. You can gently clean the nose and eyes by wiping them with a soft cotton square moistened with warm water.
- Humidifying the environment can help a congested kitten or cat breathe better. You can put your kitten or cat in a small bathroom and close the door while you take a hot shower, or you can use a warm mist humidifier or vaporizer. Be sure that your kitten or cat stays warm and does not become chilled.
- If your kitten who is 12 weeks old or younger is not eating/nursing and/or seems lethargic, you should rub some white corn syrup on your kitten's gums with a cotton swab. If you do not have white corn syrup, maple syrup may be used.
- If medications have been prescribed for your kitten or cat, be sure that you give these as directed.

