

Feline Rhinotracheitis  
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Feline rhinotracheitis is a contagious disease of cats caused by Feline Herpes Virus-1. It can cause sneezing, fever, conjunctivitis, runny nose and eyes and sometimes ulcers on the outer surface of the eye (the cornea). Fortunately, there is a very effective vaccine available which can prevent the disease. It is one of the components of the traditional “distemper” vaccine routinely given to cats.

Problems occur when cats are exposed before they are given vaccines. Some of these cats become very sick, but recover completely. Still other cats will become chronic carriers of the virus, and have recurring clinical signs. Because this is a herpes virus it tends to be cyclic, just like herpes in humans. It is, however, NOT contagious between cats and humans; each species gets their own herpes virus. Basically, these carrier cats can be normal for long periods of time and have episodes of sneezing and/or conjunctivitis/corneal ulcers. Some carrier cats have some increased nasal noise all the time; we call them chronic snorkers.

Treatment is generally aimed at the specific clinical sign and can range from oral antibiotics to treat secondary bacterial infections, to eye ointments and fluids to rehydrate the cat and help bring down a fever.

Obviously, it is best to prevent the disease with proper vaccinations. But if your cat is a chronic carrier you can try to increase time between episodes and decrease clinical signs by giving your cat lysine. Lysine is an amino acid that you can buy at natural/health food stores, or some pharmacies. Lysine interferes with another naturally occurring amino acid called arginine. Viruses normally use arginine to make more viral particles, but they will mistakenly use lysine if available, causing the viral particles to be defective and less infective. Because it is an amino acid there is very little risk of side effects. Most cats should get 500mg twice a day, while kittens and cats under 8 pounds should get 250mg twice a day. The most important part of lysine therapy is that once your cat starts therapy s/he should stay on it for life. If your cat starts to do well, it means the lysine is working so keep giving it.