

Calicivirus

By Dr. Karen Becker

Hi, I'm Dr. Becker. Calicivirus, which is also called feline calicivirus or FCV, is a common respiratory disease seen in cats. Along with feline herpes virus, calicivirus causes the vast majority of upper respiratory infections in cats. The virus infects the respiratory tract, including the lungs, nose and mouth, and can cause ulcers on the tongue and affect the intestines and musculoskeletal system as well.

Calicivirus is highly infectious and is actually most often seen in shelters, catteries and other similar facilities where there are a lot of kitties that are housed together in a potentially very stressful environment. It can occur in kitties of any age, but kittens over six weeks of age seem to be the most susceptible.

There is a vaccine against calicivirus that many veterinarians recommend. I am not one of them. It's a little bit like the kennel cough vaccine for dogs. There's ample evidence that the vaccine is virtually useless in decreasing the prevalence of the disease. Remember that more calici vaccines or giving calici every year doesn't necessarily offer more protection. So because the majority of cats have been vaccinated against this virus as a part of their combination kitten vaccines, continuing to revaccinate cats year after year does nothing to foster additional protection. I'm not a big fan of repetitive calici vaccines.

Calicivirus is spread in the air when an infected cat sneezes. As the droplets fall on the ground – they contain these infected virus particles – they contaminate the surfaces that they land on. The virus can also exist on dust particles and dander. Calicivirus can also transfer to objects an infected cat uses, such as a food and water bowls, litterboxes and bedding. Other cats who come in contact with these objects can then be infected.

Finally, the virus can be transmitted through direct contact between cats. If a healthy cat is exposed to an infected kitty's saliva, nasal or eye discharge, then they can become infected. That's one of the reasons why I recommend if you have a naïve cat at home, if you have a kitty that has never been vaccinated for anything, which is totally fine because he never goes outside, never exposed to any other kitties, if you find a snot-nosed kitten in a parking lot somewhere – that's why it's really important that you not bring home a wild kitty, a feral rescue or a stray kitty.

You can bring them home, but you don't expose those stray kitties to your cat at home because these are the types of infections that can occur with one encounter between an infected cat and your healthy cat, [snap] and your cat is infected with calici.

Symptoms of a Calicivirus Infection

The calicivirus mutates very, very easily, which means there are many different strains of the virus. There are many different strains that exist in nature, some of which cause more serious

diseases than others. Calicivirus is most often manifested as an acute upper respiratory infection, with symptoms that include sneezing, runny nose, pinkeye, which is conjunctivitis. Kitties can become lethargic. Typically because they can't smell, they lose their appetite. They can run a low-grade fever. There can be monumental difficulties breathing. There's a lot of mucous and snot. There can be coughing.

In the cases of very young kittens, certainly pneumonia can develop. Symptoms typically come on suddenly and can last from a few days to a few weeks.

Additional symptoms of calicivirus can include the development of ulcers on the tongue, as well as the hard palate, and also the lips, nose and mouth. In rare instances actually, there can be inflammation of the joints, which can result in painful walking. Those are very rare cases with an extremely virulent strain of calici. Most of the time, it's the traditional cold that cats get. Rarely, calicivirus can manifest as a virulent systemic FCV, which involves a highly pathogenic strain of the virus, which can affect organs and blood vessels. Again, very rare.

Diagnosis for Calicivirus

Your veterinarian will take a thorough history of your cat's symptoms and perform a physical exam. He or she will also complete a complete blood count (CBC) and a chemical blood profile, which means take some blood and find out what's going on in the inside. An FCV antibody test will also be needed to evaluate the level of calicivirus antigen or antibodies in your cat's system.

A more advanced test can also be performed that involves growing isolated viruses using a technique called cell culture. Your vet may also take a chest x-ray to check for changes in your cat's lung tissue or just to make sure your cat isn't fighting pneumonia.

Veterinary Treatment and Care for Infected Kitties

The vast majority of cats with very mild infections, which is most of the cats infected, do not require veterinary care. But cats, obviously, with pneumonia or a bleeding problem will need to be hospitalized and stabilized. Secondary infections will need to be managed. Sometimes young kittens absolutely just need a round of intravenous (IV) fluids to correct dehydration. Sometimes, nutritional support is offered as well.

Steam inhalation or nebulization with colloidal silver I have found to be very, very effective for these young kittens, especially with severe nasal congestion. That's something that I find very, very helpful when managing, oftentimes, a litter of kittens that come in infected with this virus. I also use a lot of homeopathic nosodes in these situations with really nice results. You can also use immunostimulants, such as olive leaf and arabinogalactans.

Cats recovering from calicivirus infection require excellent nursing care, including making sure that you're cleaning out snot, crusty eyes, making sure that there's no buildup of gooey secretions in the eyes, ears, nose and throat. Cats with FCV need to be encouraged to eat,

especially because they can't smell their food. Gently warming your cat's food, along with raising the bowl so that the aroma's closer, maybe using some bone broth or some gently cooked chicken or a topper to get them eating could be important.

The prognosis for kitties and cats with calicivirus really depends on the severity of the symptoms, with most cats recovering in about a week. But in severe situations, sometimes it can take several weeks for a kitty to make a complete recovery.

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