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Feline Herpesvirus

What is Feline Herpesvirus?

Feline Herpesvirus (FHV-1) is a species specific virus that causes clinical signs of upper respiratory infection and eye problems in cats. This is the cause of most upper respiratory infections in kittens and cats. The virus is contagious and is generally transmitted from the dam to the kittens very early in life. The disease is also a common problem in catteries and shelters. Once exposed, cats may develop variable clinical signs, and secondary bacterial infection can worsen clinical signs and may require treatment with topical and systemic antibiotics. This diagnosis is often based on clinical signs and history, with or without diagnostic testing. Although there are several tests for FHV-1, PCR is the most sensitive as it detects viral DNA.

What are the common clinical signs?

Clinical signs of initial infection with FHV-1 vary, but may include upper respiratory congestion, sneezing, decreased appetite, lethargy, fever and eye problems, such as tearing, conjunctivitis, squinting, and potentially corneal ulcers. After 1-3 weeks, the immune system should gain control of the condition, and clinical signs improve or resolve. Some cats clear the virus and are immune to it, while others clear the virus but are susceptible to re-infection. Additionally, many cats harbor the virus in structures called trigeminal nerve ganglia, and they may intermittently shed virus, with or without clinical signs of illness. Some of these cats develop chronic recurrent upper respiratory problems and/or surface ocular problems.

Chronically infected cats will intermittently demonstrate variable clinical signs, including respiratory congestion, sneezing, tearing, conjunctivitis, squinting, corneal ulcers or sequestra. In many cases, one eye is more severely affected than the other, due to the location of the nerve ganglia that harbor the virus. Recrudescence of clinical signs may be associated with stress or a compromised immune system, or it may seem cyclic or seasonal in some patients.

What is the treatment?

As long as clinical signs are mild, many initially infected patients do not require treatment, while others benefit from topical or systemic antibiotics to treat a secondary bacterial infection. Patients that are more severely affected may require supportive care and/or topical and systemic antiviral to treat the underlying FHV-1 disease.

Chronic FHV-1 cats often benefit from treatment with topical and, if indicated, systemic antivirals. During active flare-ups, patients may require medications a few times daily. Some patients seem to experience fewer flare-ups, patients may require medications a few times daily. Some patients seem to experience fewer flare-ups if they are maintained on medications a few times weekly, while other patients only require intermittent treatment. Occasionally, surgery is required when corneal ulcers become complicated or when corneal sequestra develop.

