

Feline Herpesvirus

OVERVIEW

Feline herpesvirus (FHV-1) is a common cause of ocular (eye) and upper respiratory tract infections in cats. This virus is highly contagious and easily passed from one cat to another through sneezing, coughing, grooming, and/or close contact. In fact, the majority of cats are carriers of the virus, even if they have never experienced clinical signs of ocular or respiratory disease. Fortunately, FHV-1 does not affect people, dogs, or other animal species.

CLINICAL APPEARANCE

The severity of clinical signs associated with an active herpesvirus infection may vary greatly between cats. While some cats may have only mild conjunctivitis of one or both eyes, others will develop a more severe form of the disease that manifests as ocular and nasal discharge, conjunctivitis (inflammation of the pink tissues covering the eye and inside of the eyelids), coughing, and sneezing. Active FHV-1 infection may also cause painful corneal ulcerations to occur. If superficial in nature, these ulcers may lead to mild to severe inflammation and scarring of the cornea. If the ulceration becomes infected, then corneal perforation may occur and result in blindness.

DIAGNOSIS

Given the high prevalence of feline herpesvirus-1 in cats, the diagnosis of feline herpesvirus is often presumptive and supported by your pet's response to therapy. However, a definitive diagnosis can be achieved in some cases through laboratory diagnostics, such as virus isolation, fluorescent antibody (FA) testing, serology (ELISA or serum neutralizing titers), and polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing. It is important to know that herpesvirus testing is often frustrating for both clients and veterinarians since false negative results are possible. Similarly, cats with ophthalmic disease may be infected with FHV-1, but the virus may not be the primary cause of the ocular changes. In these cases, a positive test result may be misleading.

TREATMENT & PREVENTION

Unfortunately, there is no cure for feline herpesvirus-1. However, it is possible for the virus to go into remission (latency). While some animals will never have clinical disease after the initial infection, others may have frequent recurrences of the disease. Either way, the goal of treatment is to control clinical signs and reduce complications such as symblepharon (conjunctival adhesions), corneal sequestrum (necrotic or dead corneal tissue), and eosinophilic keratitis (an immune-mediated condition of the cornea). This is accomplished in several ways:

- **Medications:** Antiviral medications are the mainstay therapy for herpetic disease, and both oral and topical formulations are available. Antibiotics are often prescribed as well due to secondary bacterial infections.
- **Supplements:** L-lysine, an amino acid, inhibits replication of the virus. Presently, the available research data provides conflicting information about the efficacy of this supplement in cats with FHV-1.
- **Stress Reduction:** Certain triggers, such as a change in routine or houseguests, can increase your pet's stress level and lead to a herpetic flare. These stressors should be reduced whenever possible. Some cats respond well to pheromone-based products that promote a positive environment.
- **Vaccination:** There is a vaccine for feline herpesvirus-1, and it is often included in the typical feline vaccination schedule provided by your primary care veterinarian. While the FVR vaccine minimizes the clinical signs associated with an active herpesvirus infection or flare-up, it does not prevent future outbreaks. Additionally, the vaccination does not cure cats already infected with herpesvirus.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding feline herpesvirus, please call us at Eye Care for Animals.