

Feline Herpes Virus FAQs

UTCVM OPHTHALMOLOGY

One of the more common ophthalmic diseases seen in cats is herpes virus infection. Herpes virus can be suspected any time a cat has inflammation on the surface of the eye that does not respond to antibiotics. The virus causes conjunctivitis (inflammation of the pink tissue surrounding the eye) and/or corneal ulcerations. It is also suspected to be the underlying cause of an immune mediated condition called stromal keratitis and linked to some cases of corneal sequestra and eosinophilic keratitis.

What is Feline Herpes Virus?

Feline herpes virus is a ubiquitous pathogen that causes upper respiratory disease in cats. As a respiratory disease, the virus is acquired through the air or through secretions and droplets, such as one cat sneezing around another cat, sharing a water bowl, or grooming one another. Kittens are often exposed early in life and then become protected through immunity or are protected by routine vaccinations. Nearly all cats are exposed to FHV (95%) in the environment.

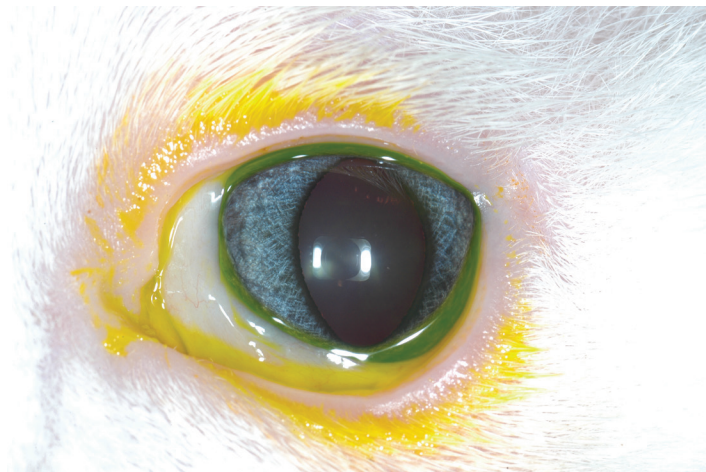
Typically, the clinical signs are the most severe during the initial infection with the virus (as a kitten). The most common clinical signs are sneezing, nasal discharge, swelling of the conjunctiva and discharge from the eyes (looks like an "eye infection"). Unfortunately, some cats become carriers of the virus (up to 80%) where the virus goes into a "latent" state, living in the cat without causing signs of disease.

Just as seen in other types of herpes viruses, stress is the biggest cause of relapse of the disease. Common stress factors for cats include new animals or people in the home, moving to a new home, and boarding while the owner is away. Advanced age, the use of topical or oral steroids, or a compromised immune system also predisposes to relapse, even when the cat may have been asymptomatic for many years.

What is the treatment for herpesvirus?

Anti-viral topical medications may be indicated in cases of active infections. For mild eye cases, treatment with a topical lubricant will help alleviate symptoms and the cat can recover on its own when the virus outbreak wanes. For moderate to severe eye cases, treatment with topical anti-viral medications are often applied for 3-4 weeks or longer. For cases that affect both the eyes and respiratory tract, oral medications are often administered for 3-4 weeks or longer. A daily oral supplement, L-lysine, has been extensively studied with some contradictory findings. Looking at all the studies together, L-lysine may be of use to minimize risk of future flare-ups but will not likely improve an active infection, and it is unlikely to cause any harm unless it causes stress to administer.

A proven option to help decrease stress is with pheromones, specifically Feliway® products (sprays and diffusers) which can also be found online or at your local pet store.



The green dye is called fluorescein stain. It is an important part of a full eye examination to determine if the patient has a corneal ulcer, a common complication secondary to feline herpes virus.

What is the long-term prognosis?

It is important to realize that herpes virus cannot be completely cured or eradicated from the cat, but by reducing stressful situations and treating active infections aggressively, future outbreaks can be reduced or prevented.

Although herpes virus infections are treatable (not curable), they can sometimes be quite frustrating because not all cats respond to the medications the same way. Occasionally, medications need to be changed or modified to provide the best results.