

# Upper Respiratory Infections: The Kitty Cold | Liz Boles

In an ideal world, every cat that comes in to see a groomer would be fit, healthy, and free of mats. In reality, cats that arrive at the salon are in all different states of fitness, health, and coat condition. The groomer is in a unique position to positively impact the health of every cat that enters the salon, not only through expert grooming services, but also through the careful inspection of each cat's state of health. Knowing how to identify warning signs for common illnesses is a necessity for every groomer as this knowledge can protect the sick animal as well as all the other pets that enter the shop.

One of the most common illnesses seen among cats is the Upper Respiratory Infection (URI). The URI causes symptoms similar to that of the common cold, and much like a cold, they can come in any combination. This infection is contagious and can be contracted through contact with bodily fluids such as saliva, mucous, and eye discharge.

## Causes of Upper Respiratory Infections

Viruses are the most common cause of URIs in cats. Feline calicivirus and feline herpes virus (also known as rhinotracheitis) are responsible for the majority of contagious upper respiratory infections. Because many infections are viral, many cats can become carriers for life even when they do not exhibit clinical signs of infection. Secondary bacterial infections can also occur as the cat's immune system is weakened by the virus. URIs can also be caused by a bacterial infection, typically by Chlamydia or less commonly by Bordetella.

## Common symptoms include:

- Sneezing
- Coughing
- Clear to colored nasal discharge
- Abnormal eye discharge
- Labored, rapid, or open-mouth breathing
- Fever
- Loss of appetite
- Depression

## To Groom or not to Groom?

Upper Respiratory Infections are rarely fatal in cats, with the exception of young kittens, elderly cats, or immunocompromised cats such as those with Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV). URIs *are*, however, highly contagious. For this reason, any cat who is exhibiting signs of URI should leave the grooming salon immediately. A thorough inspection of cats at check-in can help catch symptoms at the door. Should symptoms become apparent at some point later during the groom, the cat should be monitored in particular for any signs of breathing difficulty. The sick cat should be isolated away from all other clients and sent home as quickly as possible. All surfaces and tools must be thoroughly disinfected with a bleach solution to prevent other cats from becoming ill as well.

## Recommendation to Owner

As with any health concern, it is always important to inform the owner if possible signs of URI are seen. Clear communication can make the difference between veterinary care for a sick cat and an illness going untreated. Remember that groomers are not veterinarians, and groomers should neither give medical advice nor try to diagnose illness in an animal. That being said, telling the owner the symptoms that were noticed and what those symptoms could be a sign of can impress upon the owner the importance of veterinary care. Make a follow-up phone call within a week to find out the vet diagnosis and how the cat is recovering. Doing so has two major benefits: to show your care for your clients and to find out if a more serious illness might have contaminated your shop. Armed with knowledge of common diseases, disorders and health concerns, close inspection of each cat during the grooming process is a valuable asset to every cat's wellbeing.



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