

Feline URI and Colony Cat Housing: What is the Risk?

Many shelters, including the Denver Dumb Friends League and the Fort Wayne (Ind.) Department of Animal Care and Control, house some of their cats available for adoption in "colony cages." These large, multiple-cat caging systems enable felines to enjoy "cat furniture" (trees, scratching posts, and perches), toys, beds and best of all, the company of other cats.

Because feline URI is easily transferred via respiratory secretions and saliva, and because many cats are carriers of the disease-causing viruses, skeptics of colony caging believe such housing systems are hotbeds for the transfer of URI and other illnesses.

According to Fort Wayne Animal Care and Control Director Belinda Lewis, those fears may be largely unfounded. "We do see some cases of upper respiratory infection in our colony--caged cats, but they are no more frequent or severe than those in our separately caged cats," she says. "One of the reasons we use the colony cages is that we are concerned about the psychological effects of separate caging. Our colony cages allow our cats to relax and be themselves."

It makes sense. Physical and emotional stress both affect a cat's immune system. For many cats, the exercise and companionship they get in colony cages may actually strengthen their immune systems and prevent a viral infection from developing into a full-blown illness.

To help minimize the transmission of feline URI in colony cages, follow these guidelines:

1. Perform a complete health examination on all colony-cage candidates.
2. If possible, observe colony-cage candidates separately for 48 hours to detect any signs of illness and to allow them to adjust to the sights and sounds of the shelter. (Of course, stray cats should not be housed in colonies until after their holding period has ended.)
3. Screen all colony candidates for feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV).
4. Vaccinate colony candidates with an appropriate feline URI vaccine, and treat them for any additional health problems, such as intestinal parasites.
5. Monitor colony cats carefully for any signs of fighting or other stress and remove any cats who are not comfortable with their colony mates.
6. Create colonies of cats based on life-stage groupings. Once you have created a colony, don't add new cats as others are adopted or removed. Adding new cats to an established group may create an ongoing disease problem and also increase stress. Allow the colony to dwindle down until the cage is empty, or separate the last few cats into compatible couples and place them in regular cages. Thoroughly disinfect the cage, and start over with a new colony of cats or kittens.