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What You Should Know about Upper Respiratory Infections

This question-and-answer sheet can be adapted for use as a handout for adopters. Include the handout in every adoption kit or give it to adopters whose animals exhibit symptoms of upper respiratory infections.

WHAT IS AN UPPER RESPIRATORY INFECTION, AND WHY ARE ANIMALS FROM SHELTERS SO SUSCEPTIBLE?

In a typical shelter, many animals are taken in every day, some of whom have never received proper health care and many of whom are already carrying infectious diseases. Feline upper respiratory infection (feline "URI") and canine "kennel cough" are the animal equivalents of a human cold or flu infection, and these diseases often affect sheltered dogs, cats, puppies, and kittens. They are "species specific" and therefore cannot infect humans.

Feline URI and canine kennel cough are usually mild diseases that can be easily treated. Without treatment, however, they can severely debilitate an animal and even lead to fatal pneumonia. Animals who have been subjected to overcrowding, poor nutrition, extreme heat or cold, fear, or infection with another disease before being admitted to the shelter are more susceptible to these illnesses and may develop more severe symptoms. Even if animals are vaccinated against these infectious diseases as soon as they enter the shelter, vaccines may take up to two weeks to provide protection from disease. And many animals are infected prior to entering the shelter.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS I SHOULD LOOK FOR IN MY NEW CAT OR DOG?

In cats and kittens, the signs of feline URI may include sneezing; fever; runny nose; red or watery eyes; nasal congestion (often seen as drooling or open-mouthed breathing); ulcers on tongue, lips, nose, or roof of mouth; lack of appetite or thirst; and lack of energy. Dogs and puppies affected with canine kennel cough often exhibit a hacking or honking cough, sometimes followed by gagging. Some dogs and pups may have only a runny nose. Without veterinary care, they may become lethargic, run a fever, and lose their appetite.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF MY NEW COMPANION ANIMAL HAS THESE SYMPTOMS?

Seek veterinary care as soon as possible (immediately for young pups and kittens or for adult pets who stop eating).

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MY PET GET WELL FAST?

Follow the veterinarian's instructions closely. Use all medications exactly as prescribed, even if your pet's condition seems to have improved. Encourage your pet to rest as much as possible by providing a quiet, warm place. This is not a good time to introduce your animal to family members and other pets in the household or your neighborhood. Provide food as recommended by your veterinarian and encourage your pet to eat; try warming a high-quality canned food. Gently wipe any discharge from the eyes and nose with a warm, damp towel. To help ease the discomfort of a congested cat, use a vaporizer or place the cat in the bathroom and run hot water in the shower for a few minutes each day. Provide lots of love and concern and be patient; your new companion will be ready to join in your normal family activities soon.

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