

Refuse This Vaccine – It Just Doesn't Work

Watch out for this 'solution' searching for a precipitating cause. They claim a 'game-changing' incident. But that's not all there is to this story, naturally. And while the article contains a cautionary note, you may want to add to their caution and skip it completely. It doesn't work.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- At the present time, "feline influenza" isn't a thing — it doesn't exist — but "interested parties" are keeping a close eye on the situation
- The 2009 swine flu pandemic coupled with subsequent isolated cases of cats contracting other-species flu have resulted in the availability of flu vaccines that can be used in felines
- Most pets who contract the flu do so in facilities where they're in close contact with other animals, for example, shelters and boarding facilities
- Your pet's best defense against the flu is a competent immune system; Flu vaccines are not recommended because they don't prevent infection, can trigger adverse reactions and can also compromise the immune system
- Supportive care is the usual treatment for cats with upper respiratory viruses. This includes fluids, appetite stimulants if necessary, and homeopathics and nutraceuticals to help the immune system battle the virus

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An article in a conventional veterinary journal has the headline, "Fun with feline flu: Can cats get influenza?"¹ But where is this headed? Are they now actively looking for diseases that will require new drugs and/or vaccines? Is this another solution in search of a problem?

So, do cats actually get the flu? According to the article's author, "The short answer is 'yes.' The long answer is 'sort of' and 'it depends.'" Huh?

Feline Influenza Isn't a Thing

There's currently no such thing as "feline influenza." However, a decade ago during the 2009 swine (H1N1) flu pandemic, some domestic cats and cheetahs were infected, presumably through contact with infected humans. Both the cats and cheetahs developed mild respiratory symptoms; all the cheetahs survived, but a "handful" of the kitties did not.

Since that time, according to the article, influenza in domestic animals has been monitored much more closely. In addition, and predictably, "As canine influenza continued to spread across the United States, many owners began opting for vaccination to prevent illness in their dogs."

The canine flu vaccine is one of those solutions mentioned earlier that was in search of a problem and found one. More about this shortly.

In a 2014 study, 14 healthy cats in China were deliberately and successfully infected with the equine H3N8 flu virus, which had mutated and become transmissible among dogs.² All the cats showed clinical signs, shed the virus and transmitted it to other animals. Apparently, nothing came of the experiment in terms of "public messaging or by veterinarians at large," according to the article.

Next came the canine H3N2 virus, a mutated strain of the avian flu virus, considered to be more virulent in dogs and more easily transmitted among them than H3N8. "Vaccines were quickly developed and implemented," according to the article, but again, "... cats weren't really a part of the conversation."

The Flu Vaccine for Cats — A Solution Searching for a Problem

The game changer for felines, according to the article, came in 2016 when cat-to-cat transmission of the canine flu virus (H3N2) was confirmed in a shelter environment.³ Then a veterinarian working in a different shelter contracted avian influenza virus H7N2, which was traced to cats at the shelter who, it turns out, were able to infect not only humans, but also other cats.

You can probably guess the direction the story takes from here. Despite the continued nonexistence of "feline influenza" and a tiny handful of cases of cats contracting various strains of other-species flu, there is now an H3N2 vaccine available for cats, and another in the works. Thankfully, the article does include this cautionary note:

"It's important to note that vaccination recommendations should be made using a risk-based assessment rather than relying on blanket statements (e.g. 'All cats should be vaccinated'). Understanding the mechanisms of transmission of infectious diseases combined with a patient's and owner's lifestyle are key to an accurate recommendation."

How Flu Viruses Are Spread

Switching the topic from cats to dogs, there's some research and history to fall back on with canine influenza. However, it's possible the way the flu is transmitted from one dog to another is very similar to the mechanics of cat-to-cat transmission, so just substitute "cat" for "dog" as you read the following.

The canine influenza virus (CIV) is passed between dogs living in or visiting settings such as animal shelters, boarding kennels, doggy day care centers, dog parks, grooming or veterinary facilities, pet stores and canine sports or other competitions. Outbreaks typically result from direct dog-to-dog contact, contact with contaminated surfaces or aerosol transmission of the virus through sneezing or coughing.

Generally speaking, CIV is transmitted by close contact with an infected dog, often in a restricted space. Because infected dogs shed a relatively low amount of the virus, casual contact isn't a huge concern.

CIV is primarily associated with overcrowded conditions like those found in some shelters, kennels and dog racing facilities. It's unlikely most healthy family dogs will be in a situation to contract the virus, but even if yours does, chances are she'll recover quite nicely without medical intervention, thanks to a healthy immune system.

It's rare that a dog requires hospitalization for CIV. Serious illness usually occurs only in very young puppies, geriatric dogs or those who are immunosuppressed, highly stressed or otherwise debilitated.

Dogs are most contagious during the two- to four-day incubation period for the virus. During this short window of time, they're infected and shedding the virus in their nasal secretions but are not yet showing signs of illness. Almost 100% of dogs exposed to CIV will become infected, and the majority (80%) will develop flu symptoms. Fortunately, the death rate is low (less than 10%). All dogs are susceptible regardless of age, gender or breed.

Symptoms to Watch For

Common symptoms of a CIV infection last from one to two weeks and include:

- Paroxysmal coughing (fits of coughing)
- Laryngitis
- Hacking cough or gagging
- Rhinitis (stuffy, runny nose)

In the Chinese study mentioned earlier involving the 14 cats deliberately infected with H3N8, the clinical signs included:

- Ocular and nasal discharge
- Cough, including severe with choking or retching
- Sneezing
- Difficulty breathing
- Depression

Treatment Options

The traditional veterinary approach to treating canine flu, and this probably also applies to cat flu, includes the short-term administration of antibiotics and anti-inflammatory doses of glucocorticoids to help relieve coughing. These drugs don't cure the infection or shorten the duration of the illness, and since they carry side effects, they are not recommended.

Other traditional therapies can include antitussives (hydrocodone, butorphanol) as long as no bacterial infection is present, and aerosol or nebulizer delivery of antibacterials in patients with secondary bacterial infections. Diffuse high-quality eucalyptus oils as well.

Upper respiratory viruses in cats, which would include influenza, typically run their course in a matter of weeks. One of the watch-outs with feline patients is appetite loss. Nasal congestion and inflammation of mucus membranes and sinuses can prevent them from picking up the aroma of their food, which will remove their incentive to eat.

Anorexia in a cat can quickly result in a very dangerous condition known as feline hepatic lipidosis, so loss of appetite isn't a symptom to be treated lightly. Food should be warmed to bring out the aroma. A cat who continues to refuse to eat should be seen by a veterinarian within a day or two.

Supportive care is the usual treatment for cats with upper respiratory viruses. This includes fluids, appetite stimulants if necessary, and homeopathics and nutraceuticals to help the immune system battle the virus. Homeopathic nosodes, immune-boosting medicinal mushrooms and herbs, including olive leaf, cat's claw, Pau D'arco and turmeric, are recommended, as well as lysine, ozone therapy and in severe cases, IV vitamin C therapy.

Why Flu Vaccines Are Not Recommended

Flu vaccines don't prevent infection. The vaccine may reduce viral shedding once infection is present and may lessen the severity of symptoms and their duration, but it does not keep your pet from getting the flu.

Too many vaccines, in particular noncore vaccines like the ones for influenza viruses, can seriously compromise the immune system, affecting its ability to protect your pet naturally from pathogens. In addition, noncore vaccines have proved to be less safe in terms of adverse reactions than core vaccines.

How to Help Your Pet Avoid the Flu

If your pet is exposed to an influenza virus, as long as her immune system is healthy, she'll either be asymptomatic (show no symptoms), or she'll recover quickly without the need for medical care. To keep her immune system in flu-fighting condition:

- Feed a nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate, fresh food diet
- Avoid unnecessary vaccinations and overuse of veterinary drugs and chemical parasite and pest preventives
- Reduce the environmental toxins your pet is exposed to, which will in turn lessen her toxic burden and biological stress
- Talk to your integrative veterinarian about natural immune boosters like turmeric, oregano, fresh garlic, useful herbs and virus-fighting essential oils

Sources and References

¹ [dvm360, May 2, 2019 \(Archived\)](#).

² [Emerg Infect Dis. 2014 Dec;20\(12\):2096-2099](#)

³ [University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Veterinary Medicine, 2016 \(Archived\)](#).
