

# Researchers find doubling shelter cats' space radically reduces upper respiratory disease

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Feline upper respiratory infection in shelter cats can be dramatically decreased by doubling cage sizes and providing cats with two compartments, reported Morris Animal Foundation-funded researchers at the University of California, Davis.

The findings are important because [upper respiratory infection](#) (URI) decreases the likelihood of a cat being successfully adopted, and is a leading cause of illness and euthanasia in [shelter](#) cat populations. The UC Davis team published their findings in *PLoS One*.

"Shelters can take immediate practical action based on the results of this study," said Dr. Kelly Diehl, Senior Scientific Programs and Communications Adviser at Morris Animal Foundation. "These changes can improve [cats](#)' well-being and ultimately save lives, important goals for both shelters and Morris Animal Foundation."

Feline URI resembles the common cold in humans, with symptoms such as sneezing, nasal congestion and discharge from the eyes. In cats, however, the disease commonly is caused by feline herpesvirus Type-1 and, because of that, often emerges during times of stress. Studies have shown that a substantial number of cats develop URIs within their first two weeks of coming to a shelter. Many shelters invest as much as a third of their resources for cat care dealing with this one disease.

To better understand and combat the problem, the UC Davis team worked with nine animal shelters around North America. Shelter staff

recorded data daily about their feline populations, such as how many of their cats had a URI and how long those cats had been at the shelter. Staff also filled out surveys, which included questions about cage size, hide boxes, disinfection practices and vaccinations.

The UC Davis team discovered that to minimize stress and cases of URI, cats needed about 8 square feet of floor space in their cages, rather than the common average of 4 square feet. Cats also were less likely to get sick at shelters with a double-compartment cages that allowed each cat to remain comfortably on one side of the cage while the other side was cleaned. This configuration also allowed separation of the litterbox from food, water and bed, which may have further lowered stress.

"Our study demonstrated that a disease we thought was almost inevitable in shelters is absolutely preventable, and prevention could be as simple as just giving the cat enough space," said Dr. Kate Hurley, Director of the UC Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program. "The benefits go far beyond just preventing URI. By making these changes, shelters can make cats happier, lower staff stress by making their jobs easier, and increase adoptions and shelter success in saving lives."

Hurley and her colleagues already have begun to assist interested shelters in remodeling their existing cages. These efforts come with an initial cost, said Hurley, but shelters can save a significant amount on medical care for sick cats in the long-term.

**More information:** Denae C. Wagner et al, Cage size, movement in and out of housing during daily care, and other environmental and population health risk factors for feline upper respiratory disease in nine North American animal shelters, *PLOS ONE* (2018). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0190140](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0190140)

Provided by Morris Animal Foundation

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