

Is Your Cat Making This Strange Breathing Sound?

Discover the alarming noises your kitty might make, the common triggers behind these unsettling sounds and when it's time to consult your veterinarian to ensure your pet's health and safety.

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Reverse sneezing is relatively rare in cats (it's much more common in dogs), but it does occur
- During reverse sneezing, the throat squeezes and the muscles of the mouth spasm, triggering repeated short, noisy inhalations that sound like snorting or choking
- If your cat is truly reverse sneezing, the episode will begin abruptly and stop on its own, typically lasting less than a minute
- If you aren't sure your cat is reverse sneezing, make an appointment with your veterinarian to rule out something more serious (e.g., feline asthma)

Normally, cats respond to irritants in the nose, mouth, or throat by sneezing. However, once in a while, some kitties will “reverse sneeze,” which involves sucking air into the nose quickly and forcefully. **Reverse sneezing in dogs** is much more common than in cats.

During a reverse sneezing episode, the cat's trachea (throat) squeezes and the muscles of the mouth spasm, making it difficult for him to inhale fully. The cat responds with repeated short, noisy inhalations, during which his neck appears to be sucked inward.

If your cat is truly reverse sneezing, the episode will begin abruptly and stop on its own, typically lasting less than a minute. It sounds like snorting — quick, short breaths that repeat for several seconds. However, those seconds can feel like an eternity to a pet parent, especially if it's the first episode of reverse sneezing in your presence. It can sound like your kitty is choking and/or having difficulty breathing. It can also look like she's trying to vomit as her neck stretches out.

Triggers for Reverse Sneezing in Cats

The purpose of reverse sneezing is the same as normal sneezing — it's typically an attempt to clear out whatever is irritating or blocking kitty's nose, mouth, or throat. A partial list of triggers provided by PetMD includes:

- Allergens (e.g., pollen or dust)
- Rhinitis (nasal swelling)
- Foreign objects (e.g., a plant awn or blade of grass)

- Nasal mites
- Foreign substances such as perfume or smoke
- Brachycephalic airway syndrome (in flat-faced cats)
- Nasal polyps
- Eating or drinking too quickly
- Upper respiratory tract infection
- Overexcitement

Diagnosing Reverse Sneezing

You likely won't need to see a veterinarian solely for an occasional reverse sneeze. And even if you did, the episode would be over before you got an appointment.

If, however, your cat has started doing it more and the episodes are progressing, a trip to your veterinarian is warranted to rule out a more serious underlying condition. Again, getting a video of an episode at home and bringing it with you can be very helpful, along with information on what your cat was doing just before the episodes.

Your veterinarian will do a complete physical exam and check for any obvious abnormalities that could be causing an episode, such as a visible foreign object in the nose or discharge from an upper respiratory tract infection.

If the condition persists, a sedated oral exam should be performed to look for foreign material. Rarely, general anesthesia with an endoscopic exam of the nasal cavity and possible CT scan are recommended.

What to Do When Your Cat Reverse Sneezes

You don't have to do anything during a reverse sneezing episode, but since your cat may be frightened, you may want to speak to her calmly to reassure her that she's okay. If you want, you can also massage her throat gently to help the spasm.

Another trick is to briefly cover her nostrils with your fingers or gently blow in her face. This will make her swallow, which can help clear the irritation and stop the reverse sneeze.

For a longer episode, you can also try placing your fingers on your cat's tongue and pressing down. This will cause her to open her mouth wide and help move air through her nose effectively, or cause her to swallow, which should stop the episode. Only put your fingers in her mouth if you're sure she won't bite you.

In most cases, however, you don't need to intervene during a reverse sneeze. In fact, doing so may only cause your kitty additional stress, so use your best judgment. Again, a reverse sneeze here and there is nothing to be concerned about.

Sources and References

¹ [PetMD, June 10, 2024](#)
