



INFORMATION SERIES

Kittens: Recommendations for New Owners

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Kittens: Recommendations for New Owners

We would like to congratulate you on the acquisition of your new kitten. Owning a cat can be an extremely rewarding experience, but it is also a large responsibility. We hope this handout will give you the information needed to make some good decisions regarding your kitten.

First let us say that we are grateful that you have chosen us to help you with your kitten's health care. If you have questions concerning any subject related to your kitten's health, please feel free to call our hospital. Our veterinarians and staff will be happy to help you.

How should I introduce my kitten to its new environment?

A cat is naturally inclined to investigate its new surroundings. It is suggested that the kitten's area of exploration be initially limited so that you can supervise its activities. After confining the cat to one room for the first few days, you should slowly allow access to other areas of the home.

How should I introduce my new kitten to my other cat?

Most kittens receive a hostile reception from other household pets, especially from another cat. The other cat usually sees no need for a kitten in the household and these feelings are reinforced if it perceives that special favoritism is being shown to the kitten. The existing cat must not feel that it is necessary to compete for food or attention. The new kitten should have its own food bowl and it should not be permitted to eat from the other cat's bowl. Although it is natural to spend time holding and cuddling the kitten, the existing cat will quickly sense that it is being neglected. The new kitten needs lots of love and attention, but the existing cat should not be slighted. In fact, the transition will be smoother if the existing cat is given more attention than normal.

The introduction period will usually last one to two weeks and will have one of three possible outcomes:

1. The existing cat will remain hostile to the kitten. Fighting may occasionally occur, especially if both try to eat out of the same bowl at the same time. This is an unlikely occurrence if competition for food and affection are minimized during the first few weeks.
2. The existing cat will only tolerate the kitten. Hostility will cease, but the existing cat will act as if the kitten is not present. This is more likely if the existing cat is very independent, has been an only cat for several years, or if marked competition occurred during the first few weeks. This relationship is likely to be permanent.
3. Bonding will occur between the existing cat and the kitten. They will play together, groom each other, and sleep near each other. This is more likely to occur if competition is minimized and if the existing cat has been lonely for companionship.

What type of play behavior should I expect from a kitten?

Encouraging appropriate play activities is very important from the first day in your home. Stalking and pouncing are important play behaviors in kittens and have an important role in proper muscular development. If given a sufficient outlet for these behaviors with toys, your kitten will be less likely to use family members for these activities. The best toys are lightweight and movable. These include wads of paper, small balls, and string or ribbon. Kittens should always be supervised when playing with string or ribbons because these items can cause serious intestinal problems if they are swallowed. Any other toy that is small enough to be swallowed should also be avoided.

Can I discipline a kitten?

Disciplining a young kitten may be necessary if its behavior towards people or property is inappropriate, but harsh punishment should be avoided. For most kittens, hand clapping and using shaker cans or horns can be intimidating enough to inhibit undesirable behavior when you are present. However, remote punishment is

preferred. Remote punishment consists of using something that appears unconnected to the punisher to stop the problem behavior. Examples include using spray bottles, throwing objects in the direction of the kitten to startle, but not hit, and using booby traps that make loud noises. Remote punishment is preferred because the kitten will then associate punishment with the undesirable act and not with you.

When should my kitten be vaccinated?

There are many diseases that are fatal to cats. Fortunately, we have the ability to prevent many of these by the use of vaccines. In order to be effective, these vaccines must be given as a series of injections. Ideally, three sets of vaccines are given at 3-4 week intervals, but this schedule may vary somewhat depending on several factors.

The routine vaccination schedule will protect your kitten from five diseases: feline distemper, three respiratory organisms, and rabies. The first four are included in a combination vaccine that is given at 6-8, 12, and 16 weeks old. Rabies vaccine is usually given at 12-16 weeks of age. In addition, Feline leukemia vaccine (FeLV) is strongly recommended if your cat does or will go outside or if you have another cat that goes in and out. Many veterinarians will advise its use in all cats since this disease is deadly. It is usually transmitted by direct contact with other cats, especially when fighting occurs. A vaccine is also available for protection against feline infectious peritonitis (FIP), an uncommon disease that is most likely to occur in groups of cats. This vaccine is rarely recommended unless specific risk factors exist. Your veterinarian will discuss the available vaccinations and what is best for your cat based on lifestyle needs.

Why does my kitten need more than one vaccination for feline distemper, upper respiratory infections, and leukemia?

When the kitten first nurses its mother, it receives a temporary form of immunity through colostrum, or the milk that is produced by its mother for a few days after birth. This immunity is in the form of proteins called maternal antibodies. For about twenty-four to forty-eight hours after birth, the kitten's intestine allows absorption of these antibodies directly into the blood stream. This "passive" immunity protects the kitten during its first few weeks of life, while its immune system is maturing, but, at some point, this immunity fails and the kitten must produce its own, longer-lasting "active" immunity. Vaccinations are used for this purpose. As long as the mother's antibodies are present, they will cause interference and prevent the immune system from responding completely to the vaccines.

Many factors determine when the kitten will be able to respond to vaccines. These include the level of immunity in the mother cat, how much of the antibody has been absorbed by the nursing kitten, and the general health and nutrition level of the kitten. Since we do not know when an individual kitten will lose its short-term passive immunity, we give a series of vaccinations. We hope that at least two of these will fall in the window of time when the kitten has lost the immunity from its mother but has not yet been exposed to disease. A single vaccination, even if effective, is not likely to stimulate the long-term active immunity that is so important.

Rabies vaccine is an exception to this, since one injection given at the proper age and time is enough to produce lasting immunity.

Do all kittens have worms?

Intestinal parasites are common in kittens. Kittens can become infected with parasites almost as soon as they are born, since one of the most common sources of roundworm infection in kittens is the mother's milk. A microscopic examination of a stool sample will usually detect the presence of intestinal parasites. This test, which detects the presence of worm eggs, should be performed on a stool sample from every kitten.

Revolution is a topical parasite medication that deworms kittens against roundworms and hookworms. Revolution also kills fleas, ticks, and ear mites for a month. We highly recommend this product for most new kittens. Deworming products must be repeated once or twice during a three to four weeks because they only kill adult worms. Most intestinal worms take three to four weeks for maturation from their larval stages into adults. Cats remain susceptible to reinfection with hookworms and roundworms. Monthly use of Revolution throughout the cat's life is recommended for cats that go outdoors.

Tapeworms are one of the most common intestinal parasites of cats. Kittens usually become infected with tapeworms when they swallow fleas. The eggs of the tapeworm live inside the flea. When the cat chews or licks its skin as a flea bites, it often swallows the flea. The flea is digested within the cat's intestine. The tapeworm then hatches and anchors itself to the intestinal lining. Each exposure to fleas may result in a new infection, which can occur in as little as two weeks. Cats may also get a tapeworm infection by eating mice or birds; the life cycle of these tapeworm species are similar to that of the flea tapeworm.

Cats infected with tapeworms will pass small segments of the worms on their stool. The segments are white in

color and look like grains of rice. They are about 1/8 inch (3 mm) long and may be seen crawling on the surface of the stool. They may also stick to the hair under the tail. If that occurs, they will dry out, shrink to about half their size, and become pale yellow in color.

Tapeworm segments do not pass every day or in every stool sample; therefore, inspection of several consecutive bowel movements may be needed to find them. We may examine a stool sample in our office and not find them, and then you may find them the next day. If you find them at any time, please notify us so we may provide the appropriate drug for treatment. Ideally, you should bring in the worm segments so that we can identify them.

There are lots of choices of cat foods. What should I feed my kitten?

A high quality diet is extremely important for growth, and there are two important criteria that should be met in selecting food for your kitten. We recommend a NAME-BRAND FOOD made by a national cat food company (not a generic brand), and a form of food MADE FOR KITTENS. This should be fed until your kitten is about twelve months of age. We recommend that you only buy food that has been certified by an independent organization as complete and balanced. In the United States, you should look for food that has been certified by AAFCO, an independent organization that oversees the entire pet food industry, using ANIMAL FEEDING TRIALS (look for the specific wording on the bag).

Cat foods are available in dry, canned, and semi-moist formulations. Any of these formulations is acceptable, as long as the label states that the food is intended for growth (or is a kitten food), and is "complete and balanced". This means that the food is nutritionally complete to meet the needs of growth and development. Each of the types of food has advantages and disadvantages.

Table foods are not recommended. Because they are generally very tasty, cats will often begin to hold out for these and not eat their well-balanced cat food. If you choose to give your kitten table food, be sure that at least 90% of its diet is good quality commercial kitten food. We enjoy a variety of things to eat in our diet. However, most cats actually prefer not to change from one food to another unless they are trained to do so by the way you feed them. Do not feel guilty if your cat is happy to just eat one food day after day, week after week.

We will provide you with specific diet recommendations that will help your kitten develop into a healthy adult cat. Also, see the Culpeper Star-Exponent columns on nutrition written by Dr. Watts. A column index can be found on this web site.

How do I insure that my kitten is well socialized?

The prime socialization period for cats occurs between two and twelve weeks of age. During that time, the kitten is very impressionable to social influences. If it has good experiences with men, women, children, dogs, other cats, etc., it is likely to accept them throughout life. If the experiences are absent or unpleasant, it may become apprehensive or adverse to any of them. Therefore, during the period of socialization, we encourage you to expose your cat to as many types of social situations and influences as possible.

What can be done about fleas on my kitten?

Fleas do not spend their entire life cycle on your kitten. Occasionally, they will jump off and seek another host. Therefore, it is important to kill fleas on your new kitten before they can become established in your house. Many of the flea control products that are safe on adult cats are unsafe to use on kittens less than four months of age. Be sure to check with a veterinarian regarding any flea product. NEVER use any flea control product labeled for dogs on your cat!

There are several flea control products that are administered once per month, and which are safe for use on kittens as young as six weeks. The most effective products are available only by veterinary prescription. We will be happy to discuss the various products that are available and help you choose the most appropriate program for your kitten.

Revolution is a parasite preventive medication that deworms kittens and kills fleas, ticks, and ear mites for a month. We highly recommend this product for most new kittens and cats that spend time outdoors.

Can I trim my kitten's sharp toenails?

Kittens have very sharp toenails. They can be trimmed with your regular fingernail clippers or with nail trimmers made for dogs and cats. If you take too much off the nail, you will get into the quick, which will be painful and may cause bleeding. If this happens, neither you nor your cat will want to do this again. Therefore, a few points are helpful:

If you look closely at your cat's nails, you will be able to see the quick, or nail bed, which is a pinkish area at the base of the nail. As long as you stay at least 1/32" (1 mm) in front of the quick, you will be okay.

When cutting nails, use sharp trimmers. Dull trimmers tend to crush the nail and cause pain even if you are not in the quick.

What are ear mites?

Ear mites are tiny insect-like parasites that live in the ear canal of cats and dogs. The most common sign of ear mite infestation is scratching of the ears. Sometimes the ears will appear dirty because of a black material in the ear canal; this material is sometimes shaken out. The instrument we use for examining the ear canals, an otoscope, has the necessary magnification to allow us to see the mites. Sometimes, we can find the mites by taking a small amount of the black material from the ear canal and examining it with a microscope. Although ear mites may leave the ear canals for short periods of time, they spend the vast majority of their lives within the protection of the ear canal. Transmission generally requires direct ear-to-ear contact. Ear mites are common in litters of kittens if their mother has ear mites. (See above Revolution recommendations – it would kill any ear mites present while it rids your kittens of worms, fleas, and ticks.)

Why should I have my female cat spayed?

The correct term for spaying is ovariectomy, and refers to the complete removal of the uterus and the ovaries. Spaying offers several advantages.

The female's heat periods, which usually begin at five to six months of age, occur every two to three weeks unless she is bred. She will be receptive, or "in heat" for part of this time each cycle. Mating behavior in female cats can be annoying, and neighborhood male cats may be attracted from blocks away, fighting or marking their territory outside your house while she is in heat. In many cases, the urge to mate is so strong that your indoor cat will attempt to escape outdoors to breed. Despite your best efforts, it is very likely that your cat will become pregnant. Spaying prevents unplanned litters of kittens.

It has been proven that as the female cat gets older, she will have a significant risk of developing breast cancer or a uterine infection called pyometra if she has not been spayed. Spaying before she has any heat cycles will virtually eliminate the chances of developing breast cancer. If you do not plan to breed your cat, we strongly recommend that she be spayed before her first heat period. This surgical procedure can be done anytime after she is five months old.

Why should I have my male cat neutered?

Neutering or castration refers to the complete removal of both testicles in a male cat.

Neutering offers several advantages. Male cats go through a significant personality change when they mature. They become very possessive of their territory and mark it with their urine to ward off other cats. The tomcat's urine develops a very strong odor that will be almost impossible to remove from your house. They also try to constantly enlarge their territory, which means they will fight continually with other male cats in the neighborhood. Fighting results in severe infections and abscesses in cats, and makes for conflict with neighbors. We strongly urge you to have your cat neutered at about six to nine months of age. If he should begin to spray his urine before that time, he should be neutered immediately. The longer he sprays or fights, the less likely neutering is to stop it.

If I choose to breed my cat, when should I start?

Please seek veterinarian advice before considering any breeding program. If you plan to breed your cat, she should have at least one or two heat periods first. This will allow her to physically mature allowing her to be a better mother without such a physical drain on her. We do not recommend breeding after 5 years of age unless she has been bred prior to that. Having her first litter after five years of age is more physically draining to her and increases the chances of her having problems during the pregnancy and/or delivery. Once your cat has had her last litter, she should be spayed to reduce her chance of developing reproductive disease.

My kitten is already becoming destructive. What can be done?

There are three options that you should consider: frequent nail clipping, SoftPaws nail shields, or surgical declawing.

The nails may be clipped according to the instructions above. However, your cat's nails will regrow and become sharp again within a few days. Therefore, to protect your property, it will be necessary to clip them one to two times per week.

Our office carries SoftPaws nail caps. These are smooth plastic caps that you attach to the end of the nail with special glue. The nails are still present, but the caps prevent them from causing destruction. After two to four weeks the nails will grow enough that the caps will be shed. At that time, you should be prepared to replace them. SoftPaws are a popular option for cat owners looking for a pain free way to keep their pet from scratching.

Surgical declawing is the removal of the front nails at their base, including the amputation of the associated toe bones. This is done under general anesthesia. Our office uses combinations of modern pain control medications to minimize the post-surgical discomfort associated with this procedure. Up to 50% of cats may have some complication from this surgery, usually limited to minor bleeding or temporary lameness. Rarely, infection, more serious bleeding, or more long-term lameness may result. Contrary to the belief of some, this surgery does not cause psychological damage. Actually, a declawed cat will not realize the claws are gone and will continue to "sharpen" the claws as normal without inflicting damage to your furniture. This surgery can be done as early as sixteen weeks of age or anytime thereafter. It can also be done the same time as spaying or neutering. Once declawed, your cat should always live indoors since the ability to defend itself is compromised.

Can you recommend something for pet identification?

The latest in pet identification and retrieval is microchipping. This tiny device is implanted with a needle so the process is much like getting an injection. Veterinary hospitals, humane societies and animal shelters across the country have microchip scanners used to detect the presence of a microchip and your cat's unique identification. A national registry assists in the return of microchipped pets throughout the United States and Canada. We strongly recommend that all pets be microchipped. The spay or neuter surgery is an ideal time for the implantation.

This client information sheet is based on material written by Ernest Ward, DVM

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