



What You Need to Know about Kittens

We would like to congratulate you on the acquisition on your new kitten. Owning a cat can be an extremely rewarding experience, but it also carries with it quite a bit of responsibility. We hope this document 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. Either one of the technicians or one of the doctors will be happy to help you.

Introducing a New Kitten to its New Environment

A cat is naturally inclined to investigate its new surroundings. It is suggested that the cat's area of exploration be limited initially so that these natural tendencies do not create an unmanageable task. After confining the cat to one room for the first few days, you should slowly allow access to other areas of the home.

Introducing a New Kitten to Other Cats in the Household

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 the kitten. The existing cat must not feel that it is necessary to compete for food or for attention. The new kitten should have its own food and 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 occur occasionally, 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.

Playing Behavior in Kittens

Stimulating play is important during the first week. 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 to avoid swallowing them. Any other toy that is small enough to be swallowed should also be avoided.

Disciplining a Kitten

Disciplining a young kitten may be necessary if its behavior threatens people or property, but harsh punishment should be avoided. Hand clapping and using shaker cans or horns can be intimidating enough to inhibit undesirable behavior. 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) it, and making loud noises. Remote punishment is preferred because the kitten associates punishment with the undesirable act and not with you.

Vaccinations

There are many diseases that are fatal to cats. Fortunately, we have the ability to prevent many of these by using very effective vaccines. In order to be effective, these vaccines must be given as a series of injections. Ideally, they are given at about 6-8, 12, and 16 weeks of age, but this schedule may vary somewhat depending on several factors.

The routine vaccination schedule will protect your kitten from four diseases: distemper, two respiratory viruses, and rabies. The first three are included in a combination vaccine that is given at 6-8, 12, and 16 weeks old. Rabies vaccine is given at 16 weeks of age. Leukemia vaccine is necessary if your cat does or will go outside or if you have another cat that goes in and out since this deadly disease is transmitted by contact with other cats, especially when fighting occurs. A vaccine is also available for protection against feline infectious peritonitis (FIP); this vaccine is not necessary for all cats and is recommended in select situations.

The Need for a Series of Vaccinations

When the kitten nurses its mother, it receives a temporary form of immunity through its mother's milk. This immunity is in the form of proteins called antibodies. For about 24-48 hours after birth, the kitten's intestine allows absorption of these antibodies directly into the blood stream. This immunity is of benefit during the first few weeks of the kitten's life, but, at some point, this immunity fails and the kitten must be able to make its own long-lasting immunity. Vaccinations are used for this purpose. As long as the mother's antibodies are present, vaccinations do not "take." The mother's antibodies will neutralize the vaccine so the vaccine does not get a chance to stimulate the kitten's immune system.

Many factors determine when the kitten will be able to respond to the vaccines. These include the level of immunity in the mother cat, how much of the antibody has been absorbed, and the number of vaccines given the kitten. Since we do not know when an individual kitten will lose the short-term 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 immunity that is so important.

Rabies vaccine is an exception to this, since one injection given at the proper time is enough to produce long-term immunity.

Intestinal Parasites ("Worms")

Intestinal parasites are common in kittens. Kittens can become infected with parasites almost as soon as they are born. For example, the most important source of roundworm infection in kittens is the mother's milk. The microscopic examination of a stool sample will usually help us to determine the presence of intestinal parasites. We recommend this exam for all kittens. If we can not get a stool sample, please bring one at your earliest convenience. Even if we do not get a stool sample, we recommend the use of a deworming product that is safe and effective against almost all of the common worms of the cat. Several good drugs are available. It is given now and repeated

in about 3-4 weeks, because the deworming medication only kills the adult worms. Within 3-4 weeks the larval stages will have become adults and will need to be treated. Cats remain susceptible to reinfection with hookworms and roundworms. Periodic deworming throughout the cat's life may be recommended for cats that go outdoors.

Tapeworms are the most common intestinal parasite of cats. Kittens become infected with them 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, the flea may be swallowed. The flea is digested within the cat's intestine; the tapeworm hatches and then anchors itself to the intestinal lining. Therefore, exposure to fleas may result in a new infection; this can occur in as little as two weeks.

Cats infected with tapeworms will pass small segments of the worms in 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 golden 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, 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.

Feeding a Kitten

Diet is extremely important in the growing months of a cat's life, 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 or local brand), and a form of food MADE FOR KITTENS. This should be fed until your kitten is about 12 months of age. We recommend that you only buy food that has the AAFCO certification. Usually, you can find this information very easily on the label. AAFCO is an organization that oversees the entire pet food industry. It does not endorse any particular food, but it will certify that the food has met the minimum requirements for nutrition. Most of the commercial pet foods will have the AAFCO label. Generic brands often do not have it.

Feeding a dry, canned, or semi-moist form of cat food is acceptable. Each has advantages and disadvantages. Dry food is definitely the least expensive. It can be left in the cat's bowl at all times. If given the choice, the average cat will eat a mouthful of food about 12-20 times per day. The good brands of dry food are just as nutritious as the other forms. As a rule, most veterinarians will recommend dry food for your kitten.

Semi-moist and canned foods are also acceptable. However, both are considerably more expensive than dry food. They often are more appealing to the cat's taste; however, they are not more nutritious. If you feed a very tasty food, you are running the risk of creating a cat with a finicky appetite. In addition, the semi-moist foods are high in sugar.

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.

Commercials for cat food can be very misleading. If you watch carefully, you will notice that many commercials promote cat food on one basis, TASTE. Nutrition is rarely mentioned. Most of the "gourmet" foods are marketed to appeal to owners who want the best for their cats; however, they do not offer the cat any nutritional advantage over a good quality dry food, and they are far more expensive. If your cat eats a gourmet food very long, it will probably not be happy with other foods. If it needs a special diet due to a health problem later in life, it is very unlikely to accept it. Therefore, we do not encourage feeding gourmet cat foods.

Socialization

The Socialization Period for cats is between 2 and 12 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 events and influences as possible.

The Litter Box

The number one behavioral problem of cats is urinating out of the litter box (inappropriate urination). There are several things that cause this frustrating problem, but some of those are related to the litter box. The following comments are included to prevent problems later because cats are particular about their litter boxes, the litter, and the location.

Choose a litter box that is large enough for your cat to fit in comfortably. It needs to be able to turn around freely. An 18 X 14 inch box with 4-inch sides is appropriate for most adult cats. Kittens may need a box with shorter sides so they can get in and out easily.

We do not recommend a box with a top (hood). Although hooded litter boxes are more private and better contain the litter, they also trap odors inside. Because cats are so fastidious, these odors often cause them to seek other places to urinate. Many cats exhibiting inappropriate urination will return to their litter boxes when the lid is removed.

There are three types of litter: clay, clumpable, and organic.

Clay litter absorbs 75-100% of its weight in moisture. This is good but not adequate to keep urine from being absorbed throughout a widespread area of litter. Solid matter and wet litter should be removed 1-2 times per day, but the entire litter box should be changed weekly. Clay litter is also quite dusty. Cats with allergies can have increased problems when breathing the litter dust.

Clumping litter is also called scoopable litter. It absorbs urine and swells to about 15 times its original volume. Therefore, you need only to remove the litter clumps; you do not need to change the entire contents of the litter box. It tends to control urine and stool odors better than clay litter.

Organic litters are made of alfalfa, newspaper, peanut hulls, corn cobs, or recycled, biodegradable materials. They appeal to many cats, but they are also not received well by others.

Some litters contain scented or odor-controlling additives. Some cats tolerate them, but others find them objectionable. To minimize the chances of inappropriate urination, it is better to avoid scented litters.

Fecal matter and wet litter need to be removed once daily for each cat that uses the litter box. Even with clumping litter, a monthly scrubbing of the litter box removes odors that may collect in the box itself. Use warm, soapy water and avoid scented disinfectants.

The location of the litter box is important. It should be on an easily cleaned surface as some cats don't always aim well. Litter is also scratched out or tracked out of the litter box frequently. It is very important that the litter box be placed in a quiet, non-threatening location. Cats need their privacy and will avoid a litter box that is in a high traffic area or a location accessible to dogs.

In multiple cat households, there should be at least one litterbox per cat to help avoid territorial

Flea Control

Fleas do not stay on your kitten all of their time. 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 not safe for kittens less than 4 months of age. Be sure that any flea product you use is labeled safe for kittens.

If you use a flea spray, your kitten should be sprayed lightly. Flea and tick dip is not recommended for kittens unless they are at least 4 months of age. Remember, not all insecticides that can be used on dogs are safe for cats and kittens.

There is a trick to spraying a kitten that will make the outcome safer and more successful. When a kitten is sprayed, the fleas tend to run away from the insecticide. If you spray the body first, many fleas will run to the head where they are very difficult to kill. The best method is to spray a cotton ball then use that to wipe the flea spray onto the kitten's face, from the nose to the level of the ears. That will keep you from getting it in the eyes and will cause the fleas to run down the neck toward the body. Wait about 2 minutes, then spray the body. Leave the spray on for about 3 minutes, then wipe off the excess. This will permit you to kill the most fleas while putting the least amount of insecticide on the kitten.

There are four products that are used only once per month. Program™ is a tablet that causes the adult fleas to lay sterile eggs. It is very effective, but it does not kill adult fleas that usually live 2-3 months. Advantage™, Frontline Top Spot™, and Revolution™ are the monthly products that kill adult fleas. They are liquids that are applied to the skin at the base of the neck. They are very effective and easy to use.

Trimming Toenails

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

1. If your cat has clear or white nails, you can see the pink of the quick through the nail. Avoid the pink area, and you should be out of the quick.
2. If your cat has black nails, you will not be able to see the quick so only cut 1/32" (1 mm) of the nail at a time until the cat begins to get sensitive. The sensitivity will usually occur before you are into the blood vessel. With black nails, it is likely that you will get too close on at least one nail.
3. If your cat has some clear and some black nails, use the average clear nail as a guide for cutting the black ones.
4. When cutting nails, use sharp trimmers. Dull trimmers tend to crush the nail and cause pain even if you are not in the quick.
5. You should always have styptic powder available. This is sold in pet stores under several trade names, but it will be labeled for use in trimming nails.

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 infection 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 they 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.

Heartworm Infections in Cats

We are still learning about heartworms in cats. There are seven factors that need to be considered:

1. Recent studies have shown that heartworms are more common than we have thought in the past.
2. In these studies, about 25% of the cats with heartworms live indoors all of the time.

3. Heartworms are difficult to diagnose. Although we have newer and better tests than in the past, several different tests may be required for a confirmed diagnosis.
4. There is no good treatment for heartworms in cats. The drugs used in dogs are toxic to the cat, so we try to stabilize the cat and let it outlive the heartworms. This takes about 2 years.
5. Heartworm infected cats can be stable today and die suddenly tomorrow.
6. Heartworm prevention is not toxic, not expensive, and is only given once monthly. It is a chewable tablet.

We recommend that you put your cat on heartworm prevention. The monthly chewable tablet, HeartGard™ and the monthly topical product, Revolution™, are good insurance against a disastrous disease.

Spaying Female Cats

Spaying is the removal of the uterus and the ovaries. Therefore, heat periods no longer occur. In many cases, despite of your best effort, the female will become pregnant; spaying prevents unplanned litters of kittens.

Spaying offers several advantages. The female's heat periods result in about 2-3 weeks of obnoxious behavior. This can be quite annoying if your cat is kept indoors. Male cats are attracted from blocks away and, in fact, seem to come out of the woodwork. They seem to go over, around, and through many doors. Your cat will have a heat period about every 2-3 weeks until she is bred.

It has been proven that as the female dog gets older, there is a significant incidence of breast cancer and uterine infections if she has not been spayed. Spaying before she has any heat periods will virtually eliminate the chances of either. There is mounting evidence to believe that this is also true of cats. If you do not plan to breed your cat, we strongly recommend that she be spayed before her first heat period. This can be done anytime after she is 5 months old.

Neutering Male Cats

Neutering is the surgical removal of both testicles. It offers several important 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 one fight after another. Fighting results in severe infections and abscesses and often engenders rage in your neighbors. We strongly urge you to have your cat neutered at about 6 to 9 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.

Breeding Cats

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 5 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 prevent the female problems older cats have.

Neutralizing Destructive Behavior with the Claws

There are four options that you should consider: frequent nail clipping, nail shields, surgical declawing, and tendonectomy.

The nails may be clipped according to the instructions above. However, your cat's nails will regrow and become sharp again in about 4-7 days. Therefore, to protect your property, it will be necessary to clip them one to two times per week.

There are some commercially available products that are called nail caps. The most common one is called Soft Paws™. These are generally made of smooth plastic and attach to the end of the nail with a special glue. The nails

are still present, but the caps prevent them from causing destruction. After 2-4 weeks the nails will grow enough that the caps will be shed. At that time, you should be prepared to replace them.

Surgical declawing is the removal of the nail at its base. This is done under general anesthesia; there is very little post-surgical discomfort, especially when it is performed on a kitten. Contrary to the belief of some, this surgery does not cause lameness or 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 12 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.

Tendonectomy is the surgical removal of a small part of the tendon on the bottom of each toe. This tendon is needed to make the nail extend. The cat retains its nails, but it cannot extend them for sharpening and scratching. The only disadvantage of this procedure is that the nails continue to grow and may grow into the pads. Therefore, the nails should be clipped every 7 to 14 days.

Pet Identification

The latest in pet retrieval is microchipping. This tiny device is implanted with a needle so the process is much like getting an injection. Our scanner can detect these chips; humane societies and animal shelters across the country also have scanners. A national registry permits the return of microchipped pets throughout the United States and Canada. We recommend it.

Blood Typing

Blood typing is available for cats. This is important should your cat develop anemia (decreased numbers of red blood cells) due to a disease or becomes anemic due to blood loss. It needs to be performed only once in your cat's lifetime.