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Kitten – 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 for many years. 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 our hospital to help 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 assist you.



How should I introduce my kitten to its new environment?

A cat is naturally inclined to investigate its new surroundings. You should initially limit the kitten's area of exploration so that you can closely supervise its actions. After confining the kitten 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 will receive a hostile reception from other household pets, especially another cat.

"The existing cat must not feel that it is necessary to compete for food or attention."

The other cat usually sees no need for a kitten in the household and these feelings are reinforced if it perceives that special attention 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 neglected. 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:

- 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.

- 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.
- **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 safe and 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.

"Kittens should always be supervised when playing with string or ribbons..."

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. Ribbons and string must always be safely put away when the kitten is left unattended. Any other toy that is small enough to be swallowed should also be avoided.

How do 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.

"Remote punishment is preferred because the kitten will then associate punishment with the undesirable act."

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?

Many infectious diseases 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, 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 or core vaccination schedule will protect your kitten from the most common diseases: feline distemper (panleukopenia), feline viral rhinotracheitis (feline herpes virus 1), calicivirus and rabies. The first three are included in a combination vaccine that is given every three weeks starting at six weeks of age and ending at twelve to sixteen weeks of age. Most cats will receive two to three combination vaccines. Rabies vaccine is usually given at 12–16 weeks of age.

Non-core vaccines are vaccines that may be recommended in certain areas or for cats with certain lifestyles. Chlamydia vaccines may be given if this disease is common in your area. Feline leukemia vaccine (FeLV) is recommended for all kittens that do or will go outside or if you have another cat that goes in and out. 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 such as catteries. Your veterinarian will discuss vaccinations and help you decide what is best for your cat based on its lifestyle and the diseases prevalent in your area. You can learn more about vaccinations and preventable diseases by reading the appropriate handouts in this series.

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

Immediately after birth, a kitten receives a temporary form of immunity through the *colostrum*, which is special milk that is produced by its mother for a few days after birth. This immunity is in the form of proteins called *maternal antibodies*.

"This "passive" immunity protects the kitten while its immune system is maturing."

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 to stimulate active immunity. 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.

"A single vaccination, even if effective, is not likely to stimulate the long-term active immunity that is so important."

We hope that at least two of these will fall in the window of time between the kitten losing the immunity from its mother and potentially being 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. Many veterinarians will routinely treat kittens with a broad-spectrum deworming product that is safe and effective against almost all of the common worms of the cat. These 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.

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 as a fleabites, 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.

"Cats remain susceptible to re-infection with tapeworms, hookworms and roundworms throughout their lives."

Cats remain susceptible to re-infection with tapeworms, hookworms and roundworms throughout their lives. Periodic deworming throughout the cat's life is recommended for cats that go outdoors. For further details about roundworms, hookworms, or tapeworms, see the handouts "Roundworm Infection", "Hookworm Infection" and "Tapeworm Infection".

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

"...and two important criteria should be met in selecting food for your kitten."

Diet is extremely important for growth, and two important criteria should be met in selecting food for your kitten. Cats are obligate carnivores and require meat protein in their diet. 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. It does not endorse any particular food, but it will certify that the food has met the minimum requirements for nutrition.

In Canada, look for foods approved by the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) or foods that are labeled as having been tested by feeding trials.



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.

Dry food is definitely the most inexpensive and 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.

Semi-moist foods may be acceptable, depending on their quality. The texture may be more appealing to some cats, and they often have a stronger odor and flavor. However, semi-moist foods are usually high in sugar, and contain high levels of preservatives. If they are fed exclusively, they can cause the cat to develop a very finicky appetite.

Canned foods are the best choice to feed your kitten, even though they are considerably more expensive than either of the other forms of food. Canned foods contain a high percentage of water, and their texture, odor and taste are very appealing to most cats. However, canned food will dry out or spoil if left out for prolonged periods; it is more suitable for meal feeding rather than free choice feeding.

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 eat just one food day after day, week after week.

"...commercials promote cat food based on TASTE, SHAPE OR CONSISTENCY."

Commercials for cat food can be very misleading. If you watch carefully, you will notice that commercials promote cat food based on TASTE, SHAPE OR CONSISTENCY. 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 cat food, and they are far more expensive. If you read the label of many of the gourmet foods, you will notice that many do not claim to be "complete and balanced". If your cat eats a gourmet food very long, it will probably not be happy with other foods, and may develop nutritional deficiencies. 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.

We will provide you with specific diet recommendations that will help your kitten develop into a healthy adult cat.

How do I insure that my kitten is well socialized?

"The prime socialization period for cats occurs between two and twelve weeks of age."

The prime socialization period for cats occurs between two and twelve weeks of age, which is at an earlier age than the dog. 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. For further details on behavior training for your kitten, see our Behavior Handout Series.

How do I prevent fleas on my kitten?

Fleas do not spend their entire life cycle on your kitten. Eggs, larvae and pupae develop in the environment off the 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 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 four months of age. Remember, not all insecticides that can be used on dogs are safe for cats and kittens.

"The most effective products are available only by veterinary prescription."

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.

Can I trim my kitten's sharp toenails?



Kittens have very sharp toenails. The tips 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 cut into the "quick" and 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:

"When cutting toenails, use sharp trimmers."

- Cats have clear or white nails, and you can often see the pink of the quick through the nail. If you avoid the pink area, you should be safely away from the quick.
- When cutting toenails, use sharp trimmers. Dull trimmers tend to crush the nail and cause pain even if you are not in the quick.
- You should always have styptic powder (a clotting substance) available. This is sold in pet stores under several trade names, but it will be labeled for use in trimming nails.

What are ear mites?

Ear mites are tiny parasites that live in the ear canal of dogs and cats. They are not normally contagious to humans. The most common sign of ear mite infection is violent and persistent 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 when the cat shakes its head. The instrument we use for examining the ear canals, an *otoscope*, has the necessary magnification to allow us to see the tiny mites. More often, we will find the mites by taking a small amount of the black material from the ear canal and examining it with a microscope. Although the mites may leave the ear canals for short periods, 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.



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. This surgical procedure can be done anytime after she is 2-3 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 constantly try to enlarge their territory, which means they will fight continually with other male cats in the neighborhood. Your cat can be neutered as early as 2–3 months, but most people choose to wait until 6–9 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.

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

"If you plan to breed your cat, she should be at least a year old."

If you plan to breed your cat, she should be at least a year old. This will allow her to mature physically, 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 I do?

There are four options: 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 rapidly and become sharp again within a few days. Therefore, to protect your furniture, it will be necessary to clip them one to two times per week.

There are some commercially available products called nail caps or "Soft PawsTM." These are generally made of smooth plastic and 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. Many cats resent these nail caps and will incessantly chew or bite at them in an attempt to remove them. Talk with your veterinarian about these products before trying them at home.

"Once declawed, your cat should always live indoors since the ability to defend itself is compromised."

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 twelve 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 seven to fourteen days. This procedure is rarely performed now due to these potential shortcomings and complications.

Can you recommend something for pet identification?

"The best form of pet identification and retrieval is microchipping."

The best form of pet identification and retrieval is microchipping. A microchip is a tiny device that is implanted with a needle; 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.

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

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