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What First Time Kitten Owners Should Know

Kittens make better pets if they stay with their mother until 8 to 10 weeks of age, the time frame during which their normal physical and social development matures.

The Big Surprise

Kittens can have kittens.

That's what most cat owners don't understand. Cats and kittens are far more like the rabbit's reputation for reproduction than the dog's. Technically, felines can have up to five litters a year, starting really, really soon after they leave their mother.

Female kittens begin their cycles when they are 80% of their adult size, which could be as young as four months of age but is generally more like six months. Many cat owners don't understand this situation, so it's best you know this before you bring home an intact female kitten.

Fun facts:

- Cats can get pregnant during their first heat.
- A cat can go into heat as often as every two to three weeks all year.
- Unlike dogs and women, there is no bleeding to indicate she's ready.
- Unless she's spayed, she will continue to go into heat most of her entire life. Cats don't experience menopause.
- Usually, you can tell if she's in heat by her behavior. She will vocalize more loudly than usual (look up *caterwaul* in the dictionary) while calling to potential mates, lift her rear end up in the air, be more affectionate than usual, roll around the floor, and try to

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escape the house to find a mate. The symptoms can last anywhere from a few days to two weeks.

- She can get pregnant again within a few weeks after she gives birth. Nursing does not prevent conception.
- The feline reproductive system is seasonal, and cats are designed to give birth when it's warm, spring through early fall.

If you would like to avoid all of this, talk to your veterinarian about when the best time is to spay or neuter your kitten.

Indoor or Outdoor Kitty?

One decision you need to make right off the bat is whether or not you are going to allow your cat outside or if the cat will remain inside at all times. Indoor-only cats are much safer because they don't get hit by cars, have fights with other animals, or become prey, but that means they remain away from their natural environment. Indoor cats need enrichment efforts to be happy and sometimes weight control efforts because cats were not designed to lounge around on the couch all day eating food they didn't hunt. Outdoor cats still need some enrichment inside, though. Outdoor cats can cause harm to the environment by possibly spreading intestinal parasites and diseases that cats and people can get from the cat's feces. If your cat is on a good parasite preventative, the risk is less. Your choice should be made by balancing potential dangers outdoors against possible boredom, stress issues, and weight gain indoors.

You can take indoor cats outside for walks on feline-specific harnesses and leashes. You could also create an outdoor cat enclosure called a catio, which can attach to your home so they can go in and out at will. If you decide to keep your kitten/cat indoors only, never let them out by themselves.

Equipment You Will Need on Day One

If your kitten is a planned acquisition and you have time to get ready, there are a few basics you should have at home by the day you bring home your kitten.

The only things you absolutely must have immediately for a kitten are food, food and water containers, and a litter box filled with litter. Eventually, you may wish to try food toys and puzzles for enrichment. Stainless steel or ceramic bowls are good.

Food specifically made for kittens is necessary (puppy and dog food do not have enough protein or taurine for felines to live on).

If you know what your kitten was eating before arriving at your house, use that same food. If you'd like to change to something else, mix the two foods together, gradually increasing the percentage of the new food over a few days or a week. If you have no clue what the kitten was eating, then any completely balanced kitten food will do (ask your veterinarian for a recommendation)

Litter Box and Litter

Rule for number of litter boxes: # of cats in the house = # of litter boxes + 1 more litter box

You will be amazed at how quickly a kitten takes to using a litter box. It will make more difference in how well your kitten adapts to your household than anything else you provide. For one feline, two boxes are in different locations. Some cats like the boxes to be on different floors or at opposite ends of the house. Most dislike having them adjacent to the washing machine and dryer, and they really don't want it near their food bowls. Each box should be scooped clean once or twice every single day, and the litter in it should be replaced every one to two weeks. When you are replacing the litter, wash the empty box with a fragrance-free detergent and make sure it's dry before new litter is put in it.

Kittens are fastidious and prefer clean toilets. Dirty boxes contribute to behavioral problems in which cats decide to pee and poop outside the box. Sometimes they get in the habit of going outside the box in a way that is appropriately called inappropriate elimination. Inappropriate elimination is one of the main reasons cats are surrendered to the shelter. The best approach is to prevent it from happening.

Your first decision about litter is clumping or non-clumping. Clumping litter means the urine ends up forming into a sort of ball that is easily scoopable. Non-clumping litter tends to be clay, which some people prefer because of the way it absorbs odors. There is scented (to cover up the smell for your nose), unscented (because some cats don't like the fragrance), lightweight (more uses per bag), dust-free (if either you or the feline have respiratory issues), natural (biodegradable and renewable sources such as corn, wood, pine, wheat, cedar, recycled paper products, etc.) and flushable (check your local ordinances first, as some cities do not allow flushing of pet feces).

Most cats have litter preferences, although some will use any material no matter the texture is or what it smells like. The best way to find out what your cat likes is to offer choices of litter and see which one is used. Try a few different types to make this experiment as accurate as possible and give each option enough time for the kitten to decide.

Behavior: What is Acceptable, What Isn't

It's easy to train kittens, and training can be the same type of bonding experience it is with dogs. Use treats to teach them to come by shaking a can of something they enjoy.

Unfortunately, you can also train the kitten to play-bite with your hand or jump on your moving feet under the covers. Whatever you want to prevent in your adult cat should not be taught to your kitten.

Food

You can unintentionally train your kitten not to eat anything other than the one food they grew up with, which is usually kibble. Adult cats really aren't that picky, it's just that kittens imprint

on what you give them, so they seem finicky. They need to be introduced to different foods when they are kittens. If they ever become sick, their salvation may rest in their ability to eat something different, such as therapeutic canned food or kibble that has a different taste and texture. They need to try different types of canned foods, different kinds of meat, dry food, and dehydrated food. They can have one good quality food that is their normal fare, but who knows when you might run out of food or evacuate from a natural disaster, and you want to give something like chicken or fish. If they have urinary problems because they don't take in enough water, they will need to eat canned food. Cats can be so stubborn on this subject that they will starve themselves rather than eat canned food.

Now is a good time to decide if you will regularly feed canned, dry, or a mixture. Cats have taste and texture preferences, and you should see what they like best. It's best to have some water in their diet, so giving at least some canned food every day is a good idea. Change flavors and textures regularly, even in canned – pate vs. shredded - and your adult cat will be much easier to work with should they get sick. Keep in mind when you are changing foods, you should gradually transition to the new food over a weeks time. We would recommend feeding a diet that has been researched and proven to be balanced and digestible such as Hill's Science Diet, Royal Canin, Purina Pro Plan, Eukanuba, and IAMS.

Vaccinations

Vaccinations typically start or take place from 4-6 weeks, and then every two weeks based on lifestyle, to about four months. The reason for revaccinating is due to the window of susceptibility - when maternal antibodies wane – which can be at varied times in kittens, not because a vaccine works better after the prior one. By 14-20 weeks of age, maternal antibodies are gone, and the kitten must be able to continue on their own immune system. Kittens receive a series of vaccines ending at a time when we know the baby's own immune system should be able to respond to those vaccines.

A kitten's vaccination schedule is staggered because vaccinations produce a much greater response if they follow a vaccine given 2-4 weeks prior. Some of those vaccines are good for life, some are not.

What vaccinations your kitten needs and when is often determined by your geographical location. Veterinarians follow the recommendations of the American Association of Feline Practitioners.

Preventive Measures

Puppies and kittens should be dewormed with pyrantel pamoate, fenbendazole, or milbemycin at two, four, six, and eight weeks of age, then monthly until whatever age your veterinarian recommends. Recommendations for ascarid (a type of worm) control in kittens older than six months of age vary. The Companion Animal Parasite Council recommends using parasite control products effective against ascarids monthly.

Enrichment

Environmental enrichment is necessary, especially for indoor cats. Think of it as a boredom buster. Environmental enrichment during kittenhood prevents behavior problems during adulthood. You cannot overdo it. Kittens that are only three weeks old like to play with crinkle balls or bells that make noises. By five weeks of age, they can use scratching boards, run through tunnels, jump into cardboard boxes, squeak dog toys, and so on. Kittens like to climb, so carpeted cat trees are fantastic toys.

Kitten-Proofing

Kittens have no sense of mortality or danger whatsoever and must be protected from themselves.

Help them help themselves by keeping a safe home for them. Because baby kittens are quite able to get to the top of tall dressers or kitchen cabinets, your baby-proofing has to be 3-D, not just the first few inches up from the floor.

When your kitty is still tiny, double-check the washer, dryer, and dishwasher before you start them because kitties will nap inside. If you have any furniture that reclines, check before you put the footrest down because kitties will find a way to nap in there.

Keep certain materials out of reach, such as string, yarn, milk-jug bands, hair bands, and the like, as they may otherwise have to be removed surgically.

Start out by giving a small space, perhaps a bathroom or laundry room, shut off by doors or gates. They should feel safe and comfortable in the small space before they get more space. As they grow, they gradually expand their space and gain familiarity with the house. That way they don't lose track of where the litter box is.

Don't let them have a free run of the household without supervision.

Scratching

Scratching is a natural behavior of cats. They do it for a couple of reasons, one of which is to mark their territory. They have scent glands on their paws. Scratching removes old nails and allows the growth of new ones. Since their nails are their primary method of protection as well as their hunting weapons, they have an instinct to preserve them. They'll scratch on anything, including your furniture and curtains, so direct them to scratch on appropriate materials, specifically scratching posts. If you get a cat tree, get one with a scratching post and put a couple of scratching posts around the house.

Scratching is the #1 reason why people choose to declaw cats. What needs to be understood about declawing is that it is a painful procedure and may cause lifelong pain. In a declaw procedure a portion of the toe is amputated. By removing this portion of the toe, you are changing the way the cat will walk for the rest of its life. Cats can have "phantom" nerve pain

years after the procedure and there is no effective treatment to relieve it. It is never recommended to remove their rear nails and only the front ones if all other options have been exhausted.

If declawing is elected, the cat should never be allowed to be an outside pet. By removing the nail, you have removed the cat's defenses and ability to climb away from an attack.

A kitten that is taught to use an appropriate location to scratch can and will learn to use that instead of unwanted surfaces. Soft paws are a great alternative to declawing your kitten. A soft plastic tip is placed on the nail and places a barrier between the nail and surfaces.

Cat Carriers

Your cat will have to go to the veterinarian sometimes, or you may move, your house may catch on fire, or you may need to be evacuated from a natural disaster. There are many types of carriers: some open in the front, or on top, or both; some come apart, and so on. You can train your cat to accept it. It's much safer for your kitten in there than being held in your arms where they can jump out. You can leave it out all the time, and sometimes toss treats or toys in, so when it is time to go, your kitten does not feel that they are being shoved into some random, unfamiliar object.