

Kitten Preparation

Part 3

Caring For Your Kitten

Grooming

Regular combing can keep a cat's coat clean, shiny, and sleek and help you monitor his or her skin for parasites and signs of disease. As an added benefit, loose fur removed during grooming will not wind up on the furniture, and your cat will ingest less hair and have fewer problems with hairballs. Combing is much easier if you train your cat to accept this activity when he or she is young. A comb with fine metal teeth works the best on the long, dense coats of Ragdolls.

Regularly trimming your cat's nails reduces the likelihood of damage caused by sharp claws, and lessens the possibility of a nail growing into the foot pad and causing infection. If you start the routine early on, you will find the task becomes easier as your cat gets older. Ask your veterinarian for a lesson on how to clip nails.

Veterinary Care

Vaccines

Vaccines are one of the best ways to ensure your cat is protected from deadly infectious diseases. Vaccines help a cat's immune system fend off invasion by a particular disease-causing organism. Vaccines contain antigens, which to the immune system "look" like the organism but don't cause disease. When a vaccine is given to a cat, the immune system mounts a lasting protective response, so if your cat is exposed to the disease-causing organism later on, its immune system is prepared either to prevent infection or to reduce the severity of the disease. Certain types of vaccines can cause cancers in cats. For this reason it is highly recommended to use non-adjuvant vaccines.

The most common combination vaccine, usually called FVRCP, protects your cat against three diseases: feline panleukopenia, feline viral rhinotracheitis, and disease caused by feline calicivirus. The vaccine is then repeated (or "boosted") at three- to four-week intervals until the kitten is sixteen to twenty weeks old. After this initial vaccination series, boosters are generally given yearly. Your kitten will receive a FVRC intranasal vaccine at 8-12 days of age, FVRCP #1 at 5 weeks of age, and FVRCP #2 at 8 weeks of age.

Your cat should also be vaccinated against rabies virus, a requirement by law in many states. Cats should receive this vaccine between twelve weeks to six months of age, then yearly after

that. A rabies booster shot should be given every one to three years, depending on the vaccine type and local requirements.

Vaccines can also help protect your cat against several other disease-causing organisms. Consult with your veterinarian to decide which vaccines your cat needs.

Spaying and Neutering

Cats are usually spayed or neutered at four to six months of age or older. However, some veterinarians recommend performing the neuter procedure at an earlier age. Having the neuter done before six months of age prevents the urine odor from becoming strong like that of an intact male.

Spaying is the surgical removal of the female reproductive organs (ovaries, oviducts, and uterus). It is a recommended procedure for all female cats. Besides helping to prevent unwanted pregnancies, removing a female cat's reproductive organs eliminates the behaviors associated with the heat cycle (including howling and restlessness), while also greatly reducing the risk of a potentially fatal uterine infection and mammary cancer.

Neutering is the surgical removal of parts of the male reproductive organs (testes, epididymis, and parts of the vas deferens). Aside from preventing the male from impregnating a female, neutering can reduce male aggressiveness, urine spraying, and the pungent odor of intact male urine.

How Do I Know if My Cat is Sick and Needs Treatment?

Even provided with balanced nutrition, vaccines, and a good amount of love and attention, cats can still get sick. By spotting the signs of illness early, you can ensure that your cat gets the proper medical care. A sick cat may have a dull and patchy coat, either because its skin is directly affected by disease or because a sick cat may stop grooming. Other signs of illness include a lack of appetite, persistent vomiting, diarrhea, nasal or ocular discharge, sneezing, weight loss, straining to urinate, painful urination, bloody urine, frequent or infrequent urination, excessive thirst, difficulty breathing or rapid breathing, lethargy, and/or any swelling that appears rapidly or continues to increase in size over time. If you see any of these signs or you have doubts about your cat's health, contact your veterinarian.

Yearly examinations allow for close monitoring of your cats vital signs and can help catch illnesses sooner. Cats are experts at hiding illness and pain and the signs are subtle at first. The earlier a problem is found, the easier it is to treat. A simple exam can diagnose things like parasitic infections, dental disease, anemia, heart murmurs/arrhythmias and more. Your cat's weight history is also a good indicator of health. Your veterinarians scale is highly accurate for

low weights like cats and can detect changes in weight much faster than your scale at home or even by how your cat looks. A change in weight as small as just a couple ounces can indicate illness, especially if combined with any other symptoms.

Behavior

The idea behind gentling is to take full advantage of this socialization period in order to prepare the cat for a life in a human world, instead of the wild.

CAUTION: If any of these experiences cause fear, pain or frustration it may result in a negative association instead of positive. To prevent this, start these exercises in very brief sessions and increase the time as the kitten allows.

Suspension

In kittens less than 12 weeks of age, it may be beneficial to pick them up by the scruff of the neck in situations where they are not frightened or tense. Since this is how their mom picks them up, there is a reflex to become calm when suspended. One reason to do this is to calm a kitten that is playing too rough, or is too hyperactive. Another context is to pick up the kitten when it is calm for the purpose of cuddling. Once the kitten is grown (over 8 months) and has become accustomed to being suspended by the scruff it is better to grab/hold the scruff during petting than to pick the cat up. Scruffing cats as a method of restraint is discouraged and only used as a last resort. It's still important for your cat to be familiar with the scruff being handled in a calm, gentle way so that if the cat does ever need to be restrained by the scruff the cat won't be as frightened by being handled in this way.

Gentling

The goal of gentling is to teach the kitten to accept human hands as sources of food and petting, and not as objects for play fights or punishment. Gentling is best done daily in kittens in the first year of life but particularly when less than 12 weeks of age. Initially, handle them in ways they find pleasurable (i.e. scratching behind their ear, stroking the top of their head and along the back) Lengthen the strokes. Stroke down the hind legs and the tail, and along the side of their body. See if the cat will roll onto their side, or roll over to accept a tummy rub. Use one finger to stroke along the top of the front legs. Use plenty of praise, reassurance and an occasional food treat. Work slowly and try to gradually increase the area of the cat's body that may be stroked. Within a very short handling session, you will be able to locate the cat's sensitive spots; usually, the mouth, paws, ears, and tail. When working with sensitive areas touch the cat for just a second and reward them with a treat. Gradually increase the time of contact required for a food reward. The cat will learn to tolerate prolonged contact in these areas. Gently take hold of a paw and either scratch behind the ear or feed several treats. Then

let go and ignore the cat for a while. Repeat this a number of times. The cat will soon (or eventually) look forward to having their paw held. Carefully try to spread the toes. Continually praise and stroke the cat with the other hand as long as they appear relaxed. Examine each toe and nail. Be very gentle and loving during this exercise and reward cooperation with treats and praise, because you are building a bond intended to last a lifetime.

If the kitten begins to play with your hands, stop and ignore the kitten, or begin to play a different game that is "object" or toy oriented so that kitten play does not involve play-biting or play-scratching your hands.

Play biting can lead to aggression toward people later in life. Instead play games like chase the string, or fake bird where the kitten can exercise and act out normal predatory play behaviors with inanimate objects.

Range Of Motion Exercises

The term "range of motion" comes from human physical therapy and means moving an extremity through its full range as long as it doesn't cause pain. The goal with young kittens is to establish that humans have the "right" to do this. Later in life, it might become necessary to clean a wound, or remove a foreign object. A well-mannered cat is typically well-socialized to people and handling and so accepts humans moving its body as needed.

Restraint

Closely related to the range of motion exercise is the concept of restraint. It is important to teach the cat to accept restraint because there is no way one person can successfully restrain a cat if the cat does not wish to be restrained. If restraint is necessary but the cat is unwilling, the handler will get hurt, or the cat will be scared, stressed and may be injured. There is very little difference between hugging and restraint. Begin to hold the kitten still for a few seconds from day one through the sensitive, socialization period. Since the kitten is learning "how the world works" during this time, any experience such as gentling, minor restraint, bathing, etc., will often be accepted as "just the way life is" with humans, especially if started when the kitten is already relaxed and sleepy.

Begin with short hugs, and gradually extend the hug. Go very slowly to avoid any fear or panic response on the part of the kitten. If the kitten begins to panic, immediately put it down and ignore it. You can expect a small struggle before the kitten relaxes and puts their trust in your hands. The reason to ignore the kitten for not cooperating is to show no threat and to allow its natural desire to be near you to increase. Once the kitten has accepted the "hug restraint" as a normal part of life try playing "vet visits" at home by handling and examining them as their veterinarian would. Look in their mouth and ears. Look under their tail and check their bellies.

Have your kitty lay on its side and remain still while still petting their head. Eventually, the goal is to raise a kitten that relaxes and allows gentle handling in any position. This indicates high trust and bonding with people.

Correcting Problem Behavior

Biting and scratching during play are typical of play aggression, a behavior most commonly observed in young cats and kittens. Kittens raised with littermates learn how to bite and scratch with reduced intensity, because play that is too rough causes pain to a playmate, resulting in either retaliation or the cessation of play. Consequently, play aggression is usually seen in kittens that were not raised with littermates or playmates, are under-stimulated, or lack appropriate play outlets.

Play aggression can usually be recognized in a kitten's body posture. The tail lashes back and forth, the ears flatten against the head, and the pupils (the black part of the eyes) dilate. This sort of posture usually develops from normal play and is followed by biting and scratching. Kittens that stalk moving objects, like your hands and feet, are also displaying play aggression. Play aggressive cats often stalk or hide, then jump out and attack as you pass.

Try keeping a record of when this occurs to see if there is a pattern. You may learn, for example, that your kitten tends to hide under your bed and jump out as you're getting ready to go to sleep. By anticipating this, and encouraging play prior to the attack, you may be able to curb this behavior. A bell on a breakaway collar around your cat's neck clues you in to his whereabouts. You may need to deny him access to his favorite stalking places in order to stop this behavior.

The best way to prevent play aggression is to never use yourself as the toy. If your kitten starts to play with your hands, feet, etc. redirect them with one of their toys. Having a toy roughly the same size as them will help them express their wrestling urges in an appropriate way. A Kong Kickeroo or even a small stuffed animal work great.

Another management technique is to use noise deterrents, such as a human-generated hiss, a plastic bottle partially filled with pennies, or a blast from a compressed air canister. These must be used within the first few seconds of the onset of aggression to startle, rather than scare the cat, into ceasing his behavior. Try to avoid physically punishing your cat, even with a slight tap on the nose. The pain of being struck can lead to more aggressive behavior, or your kitten will learn to fear and avoid you. Additionally, any physical contact may be interpreted as play, which rewards your kitten's rambunctious behavior. Simply walking away and ignoring your kitten is sometimes effective; it teaches him that the consequence of rough play is no play.

All of your interactive play objects should be at a distance from your hands, so your cat has no opportunity to bite or scratch you. For example:

- Toss moving objects like ping-pong balls, walnuts, or aluminum foil balls for your cat to chase.
- Provide climbing perches, scratching posts, and ball toys that deliver food when batted about.
- Buy a fishing pole toy with feathers on the end to dangle in front of your cat.

Cats like kids can become bored with toys. Rotating available toys will help keep your cat more entertained.