

Kittens: Recommendations for New Owners

Congratulations on your new kitten! Owning a cat can be an extremely rewarding experience, but it also requires a great deal of responsibility. We hope this document will give you the information you need to live a healthy and fulfilling life together.

First, let us say how grateful we are that you have chosen The Drake Center to aid in your kitten's care. If you have questions concerning his/her health, please feel free to call us at (760) 456-9556. Our entire professional staff are available to help.

**How should I introduce my new kitten to his/her new environment?**

A cat is naturally inclined to investigate his/her 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 him/her 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 another cat. The other cat usually sees no need for a kitten in the household and these feelings are often reinforced if he/she perceives favoritism. The existing cat must not feel that it is necessary to compete for food or attention; therefore, the new kitten should have his/her own food and 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 he/she 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 usual. 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 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.
* 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 or if the existing cat has been lonely for companionship.

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

Stimulating play is important for your kitten, especially during the first week. Stalking and pouncing are key 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, such as wads of paper, small balls and ribbon. Kittens should always be supervised when playing with ribbon or string to avoid swallowing. 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 his/her behavior threatens people or property, but harsh punishment should be avoided. Hand clapping, as well as the use of 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) him/her and making loud noises. Remote punishment is preferred because the kitten associates punishment with the undesirable act and not with you.

**When should my kitten be vaccinated?**

We have the ability to prevent many feline illnesses—including fatal diseases—through the use of vaccines. In order to be effective, these vaccines must be given as a series of injections. Ideally, the vaccines are given at around eight, 12 and 16 weeks of age. However, this schedule may vary depending on several factors.

The routine vaccination schedule will protect your kitten from five diseases: distemper, three respiratory organisms and rabies. The first four are included in a combination vaccine that is given at six, eight, 12 and 16 weeks old. The rabies vaccine is given at 12 weeks of age.

The leukemia (FeLV) vaccine is appropriate for any cat, but is a necessity if your cat does or will go outside or if you have another cat that goes in and out. 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), an uncommon disease that is most likely to occur in groups of cats.

**Why does my kitten need more than one vaccination?**

When a kitten nurses his/her mother, he/she receives a temporary form of immunity through the mother's milk. This immunity is in the form of proteins called antibodies. For about 24 to 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 eventually the immunity fails and the kitten must be able to make his/her own long-lasting defense against disease. Vaccinations are used for this purpose.

As long as the mother's antibodies are present, vaccinations do not have a chance to stimulate the kitten’s immune system. The mother's antibodies interfere by neutralizing the vaccine. Many factors determine when the kitten will be able to respond to the vaccinations. These include the level of immunity in the mother cat, how many of the antibodies have been absorbed and the number of vaccines given to 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 immunity from his/her mother but has not yet been exposed to disease.

A single vaccination, even if effective, is not likely to stimulate the long-term immunity. The rabies vaccine is an exception to this, since one injection given at the proper time is enough to produce long-term immunity.

**Do all kittens have worms?**

Intestinal parasites are common in kittens. Kittens can become infected with parasites before they are born or later through 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.

Even if we do not get a stool sample, we recommend the use of a deworming product that is safe and effective against several common worms in the cat. We do this because our deworming medication has no side effects and because worms do not pass eggs every day, so the stool sample we have may not detect worms that are really present.

Deworming is done immediately and repeated in about three weeks. It is important to repeat this treatment because the deworming medication only kills adult worms. Within three to four weeks, the larval stages will have become adults and will need to be treated.

Cats remain susceptible to reinfection with hookworms and roundworms; therefore, periodic deworming throughout the cat's life may be recommended for cats that go outdoors.

Tapeworms are the most common intestinal parasite of cats. The eggs of the tapeworm live inside fleas. Kittens become infected with these worms when fleas are accidentally ingested upon licking or chewing the skin. The flea is digested within the cat's intestine and the tapeworm hatches, anchoring itself to the intestinal lining. Therefore, exposure to fleas may result in a new infection that can occur in as little as two weeks.

Cats infected with tapeworms will pass small segments of the worms in their stool. These segments are white in color and look like grains of rice. They are about 1/8-inch long and may be seen crawling on the surface of the stool. They may also stick to the hair under the tail. If this occurs, the worms 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, but you may find them the next day. If you find them at any time, please notify us so we may provide the appropriate treatment.

**What about heartworms?**

Heartworms are important parasites, especially in certain climates. They can live in your cat's heart and cause major damage to the heart and lungs. Heartworms are transmitted by mosquitoes, so your cat does not have to be in contact with another cat to be exposed. Obviously, cats that go outdoors are more likely to contract the disease; however, about 25 percent of cats diagnosed with heartworms are reported by their owners to be indoor-only. This simply means that mosquitoes that come into the house are just as dangerous as the ones outdoors.

Currently, there is no treatment for heartworms in cats, but preventative medication is available.

**What should I feed my kitten?**

Diet is extremely important in the growing months of a cat's life and there are two important criteria that should be met when selecting food for your kitten. We recommend a **NAME-BRAND FOOD** made by a national dog food company (not a generic or local brand) as well as a formula **MADE FOR KITTENS**. This should be fed until your kitten is about 12 months of age.

We recommend that you only buy food with an Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) certification. Usually, you can find this information very easily on the label. AAFCO is an organization that oversees the entire pet food industry. This organization does not endorse any particular food, but will certify that particular foods meet the minimum requirements for nutrition. Most commercial pet foods will have the AAFCO label, whereas generic brands often do not. In Canada, look for foods approved by the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA).

Feeding a dry, canned or semi-moist form of cat food is acceptable. Each has advantages and disadvantages. Dry food is the most inexpensive and preferred brands of dry food are just as nutritious as other forms. As a rule, most veterinarians will recommend dry food for your kitten. Semi-moist and canned foods 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, many semi-moist foods are high in sugar.

Table food is not recommended. Because human food is generally very tasty, cats will often begin to hold out for these special treats and not eat the well-balanced cat food. If you choose to give your kitten table food, be sure that at least 90 percent of his/her diet is good quality commercial kitten food.

We enjoy a variety of food in our diet. However, most cats actually prefer not to change from one food to another unless they are trained to do so. 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 most commercials promote cat food on one basis—taste. Nutrition is rarely mentioned. Most "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 for a long period of time, she will likely not be happy with any other foods. Therefore, if your cat needs a special diet due to a health problem later in life, he/she will probably be very unlikely to accept it.

**How do I ensure that my kitten is well socialized?**

The socialization period for cats is between two and 12 weeks of age. During that time, the kitten is very impressionable to social influences. If he/she has good experiences with men, women, children, dogs and other cats, he/she is likely to accept them throughout life. If the experiences are absent or unpleasant, he/she may become apprehensive or adverse to any of these people or animals. Therefore, during the period of socialization, we encourage you to expose your cat to as many types of social events and influences as possible.

**What can be done about fleas on my kitten?**

Fleas may not stay on your kitten for long; 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 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. This trick to spraying a kitten 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. This will keep you from getting the spray in the eyes and will cause the fleas to run toward the body. Wait about two minutes, then spray the back of the head and the body. Leave the spray on for about three 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.

For long-term flea control in kittens, we recommend using one of three products on a monthly basis. All are safe to use in kittens over eight weeks of age.

* Program is an insect growth inhibitor that kills fleas in the egg and larvae stage, helping to prevent mature fleas. It is available in a monthly tablet or six-month injectible for cats.
* Revolution is a monthly topical treatment that prevents adult fleas and ear mites, as well as round, hook and heartworms.
* Vectra is another monthly topical that kills adult fleas and prevents development of immature flea stages like eggs and larvae.

**Can I trim my kitten's nails?**

Kittens have very sharp nails. 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 blood vessel or quick, causing bleeding and pain. If this happens, neither you nor your cat will want to do this again. Therefore, a few points are helpful:

* 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.
* If your cat has black nails, you will not be able to see the quick, so only cut a very small amount 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.
* If your cat has some clear and some black nails, use the average clear nail as a guide for cutting the black ones.
* When cutting nails, 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 available. If you have cut into the kitten's quick, this powder will help to stop the bleeding. Styptic powder 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. 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, ear mites spend the vast majority of their lives within the protection of the canal. Transmission generally requires direct ear-to-ear contact.

Ear mites are common in litters of kittens in which the mother has ear mites. Ear infections may also cause the production of a dark discharge in the ear canals. It is important that we examine your puppy to be sure the black material is due to ear mites and not infection.

**Why should I have my female cat spayed?**

Spaying is the removal of the uterus and ovaries. This offers several advantages. The female heat period results in about two to three weeks of obnoxious behavior that can be quite annoying if your cat is kept indoors. Intact male cats will go to great lengths to mate with females who are in heat, and despite your best efforts, accidents often happen. Your cat will have a heat period about every two to three weeks until she is bred. Spaying means that your cat's heat periods will no longer occur and unplanned litters will be prevented.

It has also been proven that as the unspayed female gets older, she has an increased chance of developing breast cancer and uterine infections. Spaying your cat before she has any heat periods will virtually eliminate this possibility.

Your cat can be spayed any time after four months of age.

**Why should I have my male cat neutered?**

Neutering is the removal of the testicles. This offers several advantages. Male cats go through significant personality changes as they mature. They become very possessive of their territory and mark it with their urine to ward off other cats. The intact male cat’s urine develops a very strong odor that will be almost impossible to remove from your house. They will also constantly try to enlarge their territory, which means one fight after another. Fighting can result in severe infections and abscesses and will often provoke rage in your neighbors.

We strongly encourage you to have your cat neutered around four 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 will prevent that behavior in the future.

**My kitten is already becoming destructive. What can I do?**

There are many options to consider for destructive behavior, like scratching. While declaw surgery is elected in many cases, several alternatives also exist.

* **Environmental control**: Environmental control means changing the layout in the room where your kitten lives, such as temporarily covering furniture with double-sided sticky tape or aluminum foil to deter unwanted behavior.
* **Behavior modification**: Behavior modification consists of training cats and kittens to avoid certain scratching sites while teaching them to enjoy scratching on appropriate surfaces like cat trees, scratching posts or cardboard planks.
* **Environmental enrichment**: Enrichment is important, especially for indoor cats. The goal is to "create an environment of plenty" for your cat in order to increase activity, decrease mental stagnation and prevent many behavior issues. That means plenty of room, litter boxes, food, water and things to do.
* **Nail trimming**: Your cat's nails may be clipped according to the instructions above. However, the nails will regrow and become sharp again in about four to seven days. Therefore, to protect your property, it will be necessary to clip them one to two times per week.
* **Nail Caps**: Soft Paws, sold in most pet supply stores, are small vinyl caps that adhere to your cat's claws. 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 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.
* **Surgical declawing**: This is the removal of the nail at its base. This is done under general anesthesia and there is very little post-surgical discomfort, especially when it is performed on a kitten. Contrary to some beliefs, this surgery does not cause lameness or psychological damage. In fact, a declawed cat will not realize the claws are gone and will continue to "sharpen" the claws as usual 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 at the same time as your cat's spay or neuter. Once declawed, your cat should always live indoors since the ability to defend him/herself is compromised.

**Can you recommend something for pet identification?**

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