



New Kitten – Wellness for life

Congratulations on your new kitten! Many of the decisions you make for your kitten now will affect the bond you share, as well as his or her future length and quality of life. We have created this handout to answer questions you may have and help your kitten become a healthy, happy cat. If you would like more information about any of these topics, please call or ask at your next visit.

Vaccinations

Your kitten needs vaccinations every 3-4 weeks until at least 16 weeks of age. Vaccinations will be less frequent when your kitten becomes an adult and their immune system is mature. Rabies and feline upper respiratory virus combo vaccine are recommended for all kittens. Rabies vaccines are legally valid only if administered by a veterinarian. If you think your cat will ever spend some of his or her time outdoors we also recommend vaccinating for feline leukemia virus, a virus very similar to the HIV virus in people. It is spread by contact with body fluids (most often from their mother at birth or from fighting with other outdoor cats) and attacks the cat's immune system leaving them unable to fight other infections and susceptible to certain kinds of cancer. There is no cure. If your kitten's mother has an unknown vaccination history or has spent time outdoors we will recommend testing for feline leukemia virus prior to all vaccinations. This test takes 10 minutes and can be done in the clinic.

Intestinal parasites

Kittens are often born with intestinal parasites (worms). Some intestinal parasites are also transmissible to humans. There are not always symptoms that you can see at home, and stool checks can be negative even when they have worms. Therefore we recommend at least one stool sample check before 16 weeks of age and will usually give a couple doses of dewormer even if the sample is negative.

Visits to the Veterinarian

Vet visits do not have to be stressful, fearful events. You can train your kitten that the vet office is a happy place! First of all, always bring your cat (adults too!) to the office hungry. Do not feed on the morning of the visit, unless your kitten is less than three pounds or three months of age. In that case, feed a few hours before the visit. Bring treats that are *really* good stuff, something they only get on vet visit days and make the pieces very small (cheerio sized – it doesn't take much). Give a treat in the cat carrier, parking lot, before entering the building, in the lobby, and again in the exam room. Also allow the doctor and staff to present some of the treats. The goal is for your pet to think of the vet's office as the place where they get fantastic treats. Another thing that will make your kittens' life (and ours!) easier is to practice gentle handling of the kitten with treat rewards from the time they come home. Don't just "pet" the kitten. Handle their feet, touch inside their ears, open their mouth and touch the teeth and gums, pet them firmly from nose to tail, put their limbs through a full range of motion, and teach them to be calm for gentle restraint. Make these sessions brief and rewarding with treats and they will be much less concerned about the veterinarian's physical exam.

Obedience training and socialization

Behavior problems are the number one cause of surrender of pets to shelters and are also a common cause of euthanasia. Kittens and cats must have a generous supply of appropriate toys to play with and surfaces to scratch. A gentle correction when they are behaving inappropriately can discourage them from repeating that behavior. A squirt bottle works nicely for this, but make sure they can't see you when you do it or they will associate the squirt with you and not the behavior! You should have no problems with litter training other than to show them where it is, but if they resist try different litter types, box types, and box locations to see if any of that is the problem. **Also make sure to have one litter box plus one for each cat in the household.**

Nutrition

Deciding what to feed our pet can be extremely overwhelming. There are hundreds of pet foods available, so how do you choose? And once you decide *what* you are going to feed, how do you know *how much* to feed? Veterinary nutrition experts do not always agree on the answers to these questions, but we can give you some general guidelines that help you decide. Above all, **feed to achieve and maintain a healthy body weight.** Obesity in pets is becoming increasingly common, has devastating consequences for your pet's health, and is 100% preventable. We recommend feeding at specific times each day right from the start rather than having food available all the time. Adults only need to be fed twice daily, young kittens need to eat 3-4 times daily. Use a measuring cup so you know how much your pet is getting each time, don't just fill up the bowl. The food you are feeding will have guidelines on the bag or can for how much to feed based on your pet's body weight. These tend to be an overestimation, but it is a place to start if you are not sure how much to feed. Also, after your pet is spayed or neutered, metabolic needs change dramatically. You should decrease the amount you are feeding by 1/3 (yes, that means 33% less food) from the first day they come home from surgery!

When deciding what to feed; learn what to look for on the pet food label. Choose a food that is complete and balanced for your cat's life stage. There will be a statement to this effect on the label. Next, look at the ingredients. A high quality meat product should be the first ingredient. Avoid foods that have grains such as wheat, corn, or soy in the first couple ingredients. Also avoid foods with pretty bright colors as it takes a lot of artificial things to make the food look so "natural". Do not change your pet's food frequently. Cats do not need variety in their diet like people do and it can cause digestive problems if their body has to keep adjusting to new foods. Finally, when it comes to people food and table scraps, just say no. Stick to cat food and cat treats unless you want to create a begging monster. Also, many human foods are toxic to cats (such as chocolate and onions), and many cats will have digestive problems if they consume human food. If you wish your cat to have human-grade food, we can help you find recipes for home cooked diets that will meet your cat's nutritional needs.

Microchips

Microchips are very small pill-shaped devices that can be implanted under the skin using a needle that contains a number unique to your pet. Shelters and veterinarians have scanners that can read this number if your pet ever becomes lost or stolen. If you are interested in having your pet microchipped, we recommend having it done at the time of spay or neuter. Our clinic uses Home Again brand microchips.

Dental care

Pets need dental care too! Periodontal disease, which is inflammation of gum tissue and the deeper tissues around tooth roots, is the most commonly diagnosed disease in cats and dogs. More than 80% of pets older than 5 years have some form of dental disease. Periodontal disease causes tooth loss, pain and bleeding in the mouth, and allows bacteria to access the bloodstream. The best news is that **it is preventable** and there are several prevention strategies available. At home, tooth brushing is your best daily defense. Go slowly at first, use pet toothpaste or none at all, and perform once daily for best effect. Dental treats and dental toys a few times a week allow your pet to help with his or her own oral care. Finally, scaling and polishing of the teeth under general anesthesia will usually be recommended once yearly after about 3-5 years of age.

Spay/neuter

If you do not intend to use your pet for breeding, it should be spayed or neutered, or breeding will often take place anyway. We generally recommend spay/neuter be performed around 6 months of age, your veterinarian will let you know if there are different recommendations for your pet. In females, spaying significantly reduces the risk of mammary (breast) cancer and eliminates the risk of pyometra (life-threatening infection of the uterus). Cats will often have heat cycles every 21 days, during which her behavior can be maddening. In males, neutering significantly reduces urine marking behavior. It also reduces the risk of being hit by a car or trauma from fighting while roaming to find females in heat.

If you are considering breeding there are several things to be aware of in order to breed responsibly. Females should not be bred until 2 years of age for optimal physical and emotional maturity, which means they will have several heat cycles that you need to keep them away from males. They should not be bred every heat cycle to give their bodies a chance to recover. Kittens should stay with their mother until 8 weeks of age for optimal social development and have first vaccines and deworming prior to going to a new home. Finally, there are many cats and kittens in shelters looking for homes. Your cat's offspring will add to that burden.

Declaw

When a cat is declawed, the entire first bone of each toe is surgically removed. It is the equivalent of amputating your own fingertips up to the first knuckle. Some veterinarians refuse to perform declaws for ethical reasons. All of our veterinarians perform declaw surgery, but we encourage you spend some time teaching your kitten appropriate places to scratch (you must provide one!) and consider declaw a last resort for destructive behavior. Some cat owners have also had success with Soft Paws (Or Soft Claws), a plastic cap that is glued over the nail to prevent destructive scratching.

Illness

How do you know if your kitten is sick? Please call us any time you have concerns and we can help you figure out if your kitten needs to be examined by a veterinarian. If your cat or kitten is ever unable to urinate this is an emergency requiring immediate attention. You may see your cat visiting the litterbox frequently, crying out when trying to urinate, and producing little to no urine each time.