



VETERINARY HOSPITAL & HOTEL

9151 Ustick Road · Boise, ID 83704 · (208) 327-7706 · Fax (208) 327-0676 · www.catdr.com

What You Need to Know about Kittens

First, let us say that we are grateful that you have chosen us to help you with your kitten's health care. Owning a cat can be an extremely rewarding experience, but it also carries with it quite a bit of responsibility. We hope this document will give you the information needed to make some good decisions regarding your kitten. If you have questions concerning any subject related to your kitten's health, please feel free to call our hospital. Our staff will be happy to help you.

Introducing a New Kitten to its New Environment

A kitten is naturally inclined to investigate its new surroundings. It is suggested that the kitten's area of exploration be limited initially so that these natural tendencies do not create an unmanageable task. After confining the kitten to one room for the first few days, you should slowly allow access to other areas of the home.

Introducing a New Kitten to Other Cats/Pets in the Household

Most kittens receive a hostile reception from other household pets, especially from an established cat. Cats as a species do not like changes and become very jealous and territorial. Hissing, spitting, and growling are natural and are the ways in which cats will establish the hierarchy among themselves. Of course, these interactions should be supervised. Paying extra attention to the established cat will reassure them that they are not being replaced. Providing separate food/water dishes and a separate litter box for each cat will also minimize competition.

The introduction period will usually last one to two weeks and will have one of three possible outcomes.

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. The existing cat will remain hostile to the kitten. Fighting may occur occasionally, but very rarely will get serious. You can minimize this by reducing competition, especially in the beginning, for food/water and affection.

Slow, supervised interaction between a new kitten and a dog is recommended to prevent injury. Most dogs and cats that live together learn to be friends but some breeds of dogs are natural "cat chasers" and some kittens may be too playful and interactive for some dogs. Never leave a kitten or new cat unattended with a dog until you are convinced that the dog will not harm them.

Introducing a New Kitten to Children

Children can unknowingly injure a kitten by playing too rough or handling them improperly. Additionally, kittens can bite and scratch a well-meaning child unexpectedly. Always teach children how to be gentle and handle the kitten properly. Teach them the warning signs that suggest the kitten is hurting or doesn't want to interact. These may include hissing when approached, ears flattened to the head, biting, growling, scratching, or crying out.

Socialization/Play Behavior in Kittens

The socialization period for kittens is between 2 and 12 weeks of age. 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 kitten various types of social influences. However, keep in mind that kittens are more susceptible to disease until fully grown and vaccinated. Direct exposure to other cats should be kept minimal and done with caution.

Stimulating play is important during the first week. 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. The best toys are lightweight and movable. These include wads of paper, small balls, feather toys, and laser pointers. Toys that contain catnip are safe for any cat. Kittens should never be allowed to play with string or ribbons in case of accidental ingestion. Any other toy that is small enough to be swallowed should also be avoided. **Never** play rough with your hands and allow the kitten to bite or scratch you. This will teach it to be aggressive towards people as an adult.

Disciplining a Kitten

Disciplining a young kitten may be necessary if its behavior threatens people or property, but harsh punishment should be avoided. Hand clapping and using shaker cans or small 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 soft objects in the direction of the kitten to startle it, and making loud noises. Remote punishment is preferred because the kitten associates punishment with the undesirable act and not with you.

Household Hazards

Because kittens are like small children and will probably try to get into everything, you should “kitten-proof” your house. Some common hazards that can be swallowed include paperclips, coins, and small toys like marbles, string, ribbon, dental floss, tinsel, and Easter grass. Some house plants are toxic. The most common are those belonging to the lily family (ie: Easter Lily). Other indoor and outdoor plants can also be toxic. Ask us for a more complete list. The dryer, washing machine, and dishwasher also provide an unexpected and life-threatening hazard for small kittens. Be sure you keep the door to these appliances closed at all times and always check before turning them on.

Feeding

Diet is extremely important for a developing kitten. We recommend always feeding a well known name brand kitten food. Stay away from generic or store brands. Price is closely linked to quality so keep away from the cheapest brands if possible. They are mostly fat, filler (corn, wheat, gluten) and dyes and your kitten will actually need to eat more volume to get the same nutrition that they would from a smaller portion of a higher quality food. The most nutritious foods are the high protein, grain free foods available at most private pet stores. Canned food is recommended in addition to dry. By offering both, you help to ensure your cat won't be a picky eater. Canned food is also a great way to ensure extra moisture to help prevent dehydration. We recommend always offering some soft food to smaller kittens, as their teeth are tiny and it is difficult to chew kibble. Cats prefer to eat small frequent meals throughout the day. Free feeding or multiple feedings throughout the day are best for a growing kitten. Once they are adults, some cats will do fine with free feeding but many will eat too much and become obese. Talk to your veterinarian about what is best for your kitten's lifestyle. Try to stay away from table scraps as much as possible so your cat won't develop bad habits. Many cats and kittens are lactose intolerant so don't get in the habit of giving them dairy products on a regular basis. A very small amount of milk or cheese once in a while is ok but limit it to just a “treat”.

Litter boxes

The general rule of thumb for the number of cat boxes you should have is one box per cat plus one additional. This is to minimize competition and inappropriate urination/defecation.

The boxes should be of adequate size so an adult cat can move around comfortably in it. We have found that plastic storage boxes that are sold at many stores with 4-6” sides are perfect. Many boxes are too small for adult cats and they can't comfortably squat or dig in them without feeling cramped.

Cats don't typically like hoods or covers. Covers were developed so we humans wouldn't have to deal with the odor. Cats may feel trapped and vulnerable with covered boxes. Covers trap the odor inside which can be intolerable for your cat.

The location of the box(s) should be somewhere quiet and non-threatening.

Cleanliness is of critical importance in avoiding problems. If you use scoopable litter, scoop the feces and urine balls at least once daily. You will still need to change the entire litter amount and clean the box itself at least weekly to every other week. Even the clean looking litter will eventually absorb odor.

If you choose to use clay litter, we recommend dust-free and unscented, as dust and perfume can be very irritating to cats lungs. There is a wheat based product on the market called Sweat Scoop® that minimizes the clay dust for your cats lungs, and still provides comparable clumping ability and odor control. The new “crystal” litters are very good at controlling urine odor but the feces still need to be removed daily. Some cats do not like to walk on the large size of the crystals. If you use multiple cat boxes, you can offer different litter types to satisfy each cat's preference.

If your cat does start urinating or defecating outside of the box, don't assume it is always behavioral. Many medical conditions can cause this behavior and it is always safer to have your veterinarian check your cat rather than automatically assume your cat is just “acting up”.

FeLV/FIV testing

FeLV (feline leukemia) and FIV (feline Immunodeficiency Virus (“AIDS”)) are two common diseases that are specific to cats. Every new cat or kitten should be tested for these prior to introduction into the household if there are other cats in the house, and at least shortly after adoption if your new kitten is the only cat. These diseases can be transmitted to the kitten from its mother/father or from other cats that your new cat/kitten may have been exposed to. Both of these diseases can be fatal so knowing the status of your new cat/kitten will help you manage their health and make better decisions for them. Testing your cat/kitten right away will also help protect other household or neighborhood cats in case he/she is positive for one of these diseases. If your cat does test positive, we will be able to give you advice on what to do and what to expect. If your cat tests negative, keeping them current on the recommended vaccinations for their lifestyle, will ensure they never get these diseases. The test for both of these is a simple blood test that can be run by your veterinarian in about 10 minutes.

Internal Parasites (“Worms”)

Internal parasites are common in kittens. Kittens can become infected with parasites almost as soon as they are born.

The most common parasite in kittens are roundworms. The primary source of roundworm infection in kittens is the mother's milk. Roundworms are a human health risk as they can be passed from your cat to you or your family members. Roundworms live as adults in the intestines, but can migrate through the liver, lungs, and occasionally the skin.

Another common parasite is the tapeworm. These are often found as small white worms around the anal area or in the stool of the cat. When dried, they resemble sesame seeds or grains of rice. Tapeworms are transmitted by fleas and rodents.

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. If we cannot get a stool sample, please bring one at your earliest convenience. Even if we do not get a stool sample, we recommend the use of a deworming product that is safe and effective against the most common parasites. Several good drugs are available. Deworming throughout the cat's life is very important, and the frequency depends on your cat's lifestyle. If you ever find what you think is a parasite that came from your cat, call your veterinarian or bring in the sample so we will know exactly what it is and what treatment is best.

Heartworm is not very common in this area but there are positive cases every year. Heartworm is transmitted by mosquito bites, and since you can't effectively control mosquito populations or exposure, we still recommend a monthly heartworm preventative, especially for cats that go outside. Heartworms are difficult to diagnose and in cats, there is no cure. The preventative medications are convenient and safe to use. Ask your veterinarian for more information.

Another parasite that is fortunately not very common but can be potentially fatal and contagious to other cats is coccidia. This is a microscopic parasite that can cause bleeding, diarrhea, weight loss, dehydration, and even death. It is treatable so we recommend a fecal exam for every cat that is experiencing diarrhea.

External Parasites

Fleas do not stay on your kitten all of the time. Ninety-five percent of the time fleas live in the environment and jump on the kitten to feed and lay eggs. Therefore, it is important to kill fleas on your new kitten before they can become established in your house. Sprays, foams, dips, collars, and store bought flea treatments are not recommended for kittens or cats of any age since they are not very effective and in many cases toxic.

There are several safe products that are used only once per month. They are Advantage™, Frontline™, and Revolution.™ They are liquids that are applied to the skin at the base of the neck. They are very safe, effective and easy to use. Always read the label first as some products cannot be used on kittens that are very young. Always ask your veterinarian for advice.

Ear mites are tiny insect-like parasites that live in the ear canal of cats (and dogs). 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. Transmission generally requires direct cat-to-cat contact. Ear mites are common in litters of kittens if their mother has ear mites. Ear mites do not infect humans but are very irritating to the cat. Always have ear mites diagnosed by a veterinarian and never treat ear mites with an ear mite medication without consulting your veterinarian first.

Ticks are external parasites that attach to the skin of your cat and feed on their blood. They can also transmit diseases. If you find a tick on your cat, it is important to remove the entire head, which is usually embedded down in the skin. Your veterinarian is the best option for removal and prevention.

Ringworm is actually a type of fungus that can affect both animals and humans. It generally occurs first on the feet, face, ears, and head of cats but can appear anywhere. It typically presents as patchy areas of hair loss but can vary widely in its appearance. It is treatable but very contagious. Your veterinarian will be the best source of information on effective treatments and controlling it in your cat's environment.

Vaccinations

There are many diseases that cats are susceptible to. Fortunately, we have the ability to prevent many of these by using very effective vaccines. The age you start vaccinating your kitten will determine how many initial vaccines are required. Your kitten's lifestyle (indoor or outdoor) will also determine which vaccines will be needed. This should be re-evaluated periodically throughout life. **There are many vaccines on the market and not all cats will need every vaccine.**

The most common vaccine is a combination vaccine often referred to as "distemper". This vaccine protects against a very serious illness called distemper, but also against two upper respiratory viruses, and sometimes bacteria called chlamydia. All cats, indoors or outdoors, should be kept current on this vaccine.

Two other common vaccines are Rabies and leukemia. Your cat's lifestyle will determine if your cat needs leukemia. We recommend rabies vaccines for all pets because of the human health risk and the presence of rabies in the bat population.

There are other vaccines on the market for cats, but again, not all cats will need them. Talk to your veterinarian regarding your cat's particular needs. Vaccines for diseases such as FIP, giardia, ringworm, and others may not be appropriate for every cat.

Most vaccines should begin between 6-8 weeks of age, but they can be started after that. The longer they are delayed, the more risk your kitten faces from the diseases we are trying to prevent. The last vaccines in a kitten series should be given around or after 16 weeks of age.

Your veterinarian will provide you with a vaccine schedule tailored to your cat, which describes the diseases that we are trying to prevent.

Trimming Toenails

Kittens have very sharp toenails. They can be trimmed with your regular fingernail clippers or with nail trimmers made for small dogs and cats. If you take too much off the nail, you will get into the quick; 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:

1. Cats have clear nails and you can see the pink of the quick through the nail. Avoid the pink area, and you should be out of the quick.
2. When cutting nails, use sharp trimmers. Dull trimmers tend to crush the nail and cause pressure and discomfort even if you are not in the quick.
3. You should always have styptic powder available. This is sold in pet stores under several trade names, but it will be labeled for use in trimming nails. This is used to stop the bleeding should you cut a nail too short.

Declawing and Other Options

Declawing a cat/kitten is a big decision. It is literally an amputation of the first joint of all the toes on the front feet. We do not ever recommend declawing the back feet. Ideally, training and encouraging your kitten to use proper outlets for scratching should always be attempted before making the decision to declaw a cat. It is important to keep in mind that it is a cosmetic surgery for our convenience, not the cats. If you do decide to have your cat declawed, be sure your veterinarian talks to you about the surgery itself, what to expect afterward, and the possible complications. Adequate pain control is the key to making it tolerable for your cat.

A good option in lieu of declawing is Soft Paws. They are hollow plastic sleeves in the shape of your cat's nails that you literally glue over the toenail. They have a very blunt tip and thus your cat can't do any damage with its nails while wearing them. They can last up to several months depending on the activity level of your cat and the growth rate of the toenails. They are easy to apply and can be purchased at most veterinary clinics, pet stores, or online. If your cat won't cooperate with putting them on, we would be happy to assist you. They are non-painful, cost effective, and most cats tolerate them very well.

A surgery called a tenectomy is still offered at some veterinary clinics instead of declawing. We don't recommend it due to the following: although cats will not be able to use their nails as effectively, they can still scratch and do damage; the toenails still have to be trimmed on a regular, on-going basis and the nails will be more prone to overgrowing into the toe pads and causing infection and pain.

Good training in the beginning including providing acceptable items to scratch on and positive reinforcement will go a long way in preventing the need for a declaw surgery. Keeping the nails trimmed as described in the above section will also help prevent damage.

Spaying Female Cats

Spaying (ovariohysterectomy) is the removal of the uterus and the ovaries. Therefore, heat periods no longer occur and pregnancies can't occur.

Spaying offers several advantages. First the seemingly constant heat cycles of a female cat throughout the spring and summer won't occur. You won't be faced with finding homes for unwanted kittens as the result of a pregnancy. You will never be faced with the very serious threat of a uterine infection or ovarian/uterine cancer. There is evidence that spaying can reduce other types of cancer too.

We recommend spaying female cats between 4 and 7 months of age. The earlier end of this range is best for cats who will be going outside because some female cats will start cycling and could become pregnant as early as 4-5 months of age! We offer both regular and laser options for spaying, as well as the latest in pain control to make sure your cat remains as comfortable as possible. Please call our office for more details.

Neutering Male Cats

Neutering is the surgical removal of both testicles.

It offers several important advantages. You will never have to worry about testicular cancer and it greatly reduces the chances of prostate cancer. It also greatly reduces the unwanted “boy” behaviors such as spraying urine, roaming, and fighting. By reducing roaming and fighting, you are also decreasing the chances of disease exposure, accidents like being hit by a car or antifreeze ingestion, and abscesses from fighting. The earlier a cat is neutered, the less likely that these unwanted habits could develop. We recommend neutering between 4 and 7 months of age, ideally before puberty.

Pet Identification

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

Collars with ID tags are still acceptable forms of identification, but cats do tend to lose collars. You should always use “break-away” collars that will come apart and allow your cat to escape if it should get stuck on some object.

Dental Disease

All cats will need professional dental care at some point in their lives. Preventative measures are highly recommended throughout life, just like with us. Dental disease can be a severe health risk and can lead to pain, infection in other parts of the body, and lost teeth. Tooth brushing remains the best preventative measure and can extend the time required between dental cleanings. If started at a young age, your cat will not be apprehensive and will allow this to be done on a regular basis. Ask your veterinarian to teach you how to brush your kitten’s teeth. There are many products that are also useful as a preventative. They include dental diets, treats, and oral hygiene products. Your veterinarian is the best source for information on these products.

Signs of Illness

Cats and kittens are masters of hiding illness. Their survival instinct kicks in and it is often hard to tell if a cat is sick. Any abnormal change in behavior, routine, sleeping patterns, appetite, urination, or defecation may be serious. Some of the more common illnesses are as follows:

Upper respiratory tract infection

Ringworm (human health risk)

Anorexia (lack of appetite)

Vomiting

Diarrhea

Abnormal or painful urinations