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Recommendations for New Kitten Owners

Congratulations on your new kitten! Adding a new kitten to your family is a lot of fun, but it is also a big responsibility. Here are the things you need to know about the healthcare needs of young kittens.

When should my kitten be vaccinated?

Vaccinations are important for your young kitten. Some infectious diseases are fatal and vaccinations can protect your kitten from many of these diseases. In order to be effective, immunizations must be given as a series of injections at prescribed intervals so it is essential that you are on time for your kitten's scheduled vaccinations. Immunizations are started at 6-8 weeks of age and are repeated every 4 weeks until the kitten is 4 months old.

The routine or core vaccinations will protect your kitten from the most common diseases: feline distemper (panleukopenia), feline viral rhinotracheitis (feline herpes virus 1), calicivirus, and rabies. The first three are included in a combination vaccine given every three to four weeks until the kitten reaches 16 weeks of age. Rabies vaccine is usually given once at 12-16 weeks of age.

Non-core vaccines aren't administered to every kitten, but are recommended in certain areas for cats with certain lifestyles. Cats that live outdoors are at more risk for infectious disease and often need these additional vaccines. One non-core vaccine for Chlamydomphila may be given if this disease is common in your area. Feline leukemia vaccine (FeLV) is recommended for all kittens that are exposed to outdoor cats, so if your kitten goes outside or if he lives with another



cat that goes in and out, Feline Leukemia vaccine may be added to the regimen. Depending on your kitten's exposure to other cats, your veterinarian may also advise administration of a vaccine for Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV).

Your veterinarian will assess your kitten's lifestyle and discuss these vaccinations with you to help you decide what is best for your cat. You can learn more about vaccinations and preventable diseases by reading the appropriate handouts in this series.

Why does my kitten need more than one vaccination?

Immediately after birth, a kitten receives a temporary form of immunity through the colostrum, which is milk laden with protective antibodies produced by mother cats shortly after birth. This first milk is produced only for a few days after birth and contains proteins called maternal antibodies. For about twenty-four to forty-eight hours after birth, the kitten's intestine allows absorption of these antibodies directly into the blood stream. This "passive" immunity protects the kitten during its first few weeks of life when its immune system is immature, but in order to remain protected against these diseases, the kitten must produce its own, longer-lasting "active" immunity.

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Vaccinations stimulate active immunity but they have to be given at just the right time. As long as the mother's antibodies are present in the kitten's bloodstream, they prevent the immune system from responding effectively to the vaccines. When a kitten is ready to respond to vaccinations depends on the level of immunity in the mother cat, the amount of antibody absorbed by the nursing kitten, and the general health and nutrition of the kitten.

Since it's difficult to know exactly when an individual kitten will lose its short-term passive immunity and be ready for immunizations, a series of vaccinations given at prescribed intervals increases the odds of stimulating active immunity in the kitten. The goal is to give at least two vaccinations in the critical window of time that occurs **after** the kitten loses his maternal immunity and **before** he is exposed to infectious diseases. Giving a series of vaccines improves the chances of hitting this window twice. Also, multiple injections are needed because a single vaccination, even if effective, is not likely to stimulate the long-term active immunity that is so important. Rabies vaccine is an exception since one injection given at the proper age is enough to produce lasting immunity.

Do all kittens have worms?

Not all kittens have worms, but most of them do. The same milk that protects nursing kittens from disease and provides nutrition also carries intestinal worms, so drinking mother's milk can transfer worms to young kittens shortly after birth. Infection can occur even earlier-- before kittens are born--because some intestinal parasites are transmitted to kittens through the blood stream while they are still in the womb. Since kittens can become infected so early and since intestinal parasites can cause severe illness, treatment needs to begin right away when the kitten is only a couple of weeks old.

A microscopic examination of a stool sample will identify which worms infect the kitten so a specific treatment plan can be prescribed. Since many kittens harbor the more common intestinal worms, your veterinarian may routinely administer a broad-spectrum de-worming product that is safe and effective against several species of intestinal worms. This medication, which kills adult worms, is given every 2 weeks to target the most susceptible stage of the worm's lifecycle. For other types of intestinal worms, different medications and treatment intervals are required.

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Tapeworms, one of the most common intestinal parasites for cats, don't follow this developmental pattern. Kittens don't get tapeworms from their mothers. They usually become infected with tapeworms when they swallow fleas that carry the eggs of the tapeworm. When the cat chews or licks his coat, it often swallows a flea. The flea is digested within the cat's intestine, releasing the tapeworm egg. The egg hatches and anchors itself to the intestinal lining. Cats may also get a tapeworm infection by eating mice or birds.

There are other less common parasites that can infect kittens such as coccidian and giardia that require special treatment as well.

Cats remain susceptible to re-infection with tapeworms, hookworms, and roundworms, so periodic de-worming throughout the cat's life is recommended for cats that go outdoors. For further details about roundworms, hookworms, or tapeworms, see the handouts Roundworm Infection in Cats, Hookworm Infection in Cats, and Tapeworm Infection in Cats.

How do I prevent fleas on my kitten?

No matter where you live, fleas may be a threat to your cat and to your household. Fleas spend a short time on your cat and then venture out into your home. Adult fleas feed on the cat's blood then hop off their host to lay eggs in the environment. Eggs hatch and the emerging larvae feed and live in your house as well. Larvae become dormant in the pupae stage, snuggle into your rugs and furniture, and eventually hatch into more adult fleas. The entire flea life cycle takes place right under your nose and can take as little as 3–4 weeks.

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 dogs are dangerous for kittens so consult your veterinarian before choosing a flea control product. There are many safe oral and topical medications that control fleas, treat intestinal worms, and prevent heartworms all at the same time. These products are administered once a month even in young kittens and will protect both your cat and your home from fleas.

What are ear mites?

Ear mites are tiny parasites that live in the ear canal of cats where they cause lots of itching. The most common sign of ear mite infection is violent and persistent scratching of the ears or shaking of the head. Sometimes the outer ear canal will appear dirty and contain black debris.

Your veterinarian will examine the ear canal with an otoscope that magnifies the tiny mites, or he will take a small sample of the black debris and examine it under a microscope. Although the mites may crawl out of the ear canals for short periods, they spend the vast majority of their lives within the protection of the ear canal.

Ear mites are easily transmitted between cats and dogs (but not humans) by direct contact. Kittens will usually become infected if their mother has ear mites. If one pet in the household has ear mites, it is advised to treat all of your pets. Successive applications of topical medication to the kitten's ear or skin will eliminate ear mites.



Ear Mite
Actual size 500µm

What should I feed my kitten?

Proper nutrition is essential for growth, so it is important to choose the right food when your kitten is weaned. Cats are obligate carnivores and require meat protein in their diet. This protein should be of high quality, so choose a name-brand food specifically formulated for kittens that is made by a reputable cat food company. Growing felines have different nutritional requirements than adult cats, so kitten food should be fed until your kitten reaches twelve months of age.

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Buy food that has been certified by a recognized organization as "complete and balanced." In the United States, you should look for food that has been certified by AAFCO, an independent organization that oversees the entire pet food industry. In Canada, look for foods approved by the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) or foods that are labeled as having been tested by feeding trials.

Cat foods are available in dry, canned, and semi-moist formulations that should all bear a label stating that the food is intended for kittens and is "complete and balanced." This means that the food is nutritionally complete to meet the needs of growth and development. Each of the types of food has advantages and disadvantages.

- Dry food is definitely the most inexpensive and convenient. Dry food can be left in the cat's bowl at all times and is good for ad lib feeders like the average cat that eats a mouthful of food about 12–20 times per day. Dry food also helps developing baby teeth and keeps permanent teeth cleaner.
- Semi-moist foods may have a texture that is more appealing to some cats, but they often have a stronger odor and are usually high in sugar.
- Canned foods are messy and more expensive than either of the other forms, but their texture, odor and taste are very appealing to most cats. Even though it contains lots of water, canned food will dry out or spoil if left out for prolonged periods so it is more suitable for meal feeding rather than free choice feeding.

For more information, see the article [Dry, Canned, or Semi-Moist: Food Choices for Cats](#).

Table foods are not recommended at all because human diets are not nutritionally sound for cats. Supplementing your kitten's diet with a bowl of milk or tuna may seem like a fun treat, but may mean your kitten will eat less of the nutritious food she needs. Some cats will often hold out for the treats and decline their well-balanced cat food. If you choose to give your kitten table food, be sure that at least 90% of its diet is good quality commercial kitten food. Don't worry about your cat becoming bored with her diet. Even though humans enjoy a variety of things to eat, most cats actually prefer not to change from one food to another.

Commercials for cat food can be misleading and often promote cat food based on taste, shape, or consistency. Nutrition is rarely mentioned. Most of the "gourmet" foods are marketed to appeal to owners who are willing to spend more, but they don't offer the cat any nutritional advantage over a good quality cat food. Your veterinarian can provide you with specific dietary recommendations that will help your kitten develop into a healthy adult cat.

Can I trim my kitten's sharp toenails?

Kittens have very sharp toenails that wreak havoc on cat owners and their furniture. You can trim your kitten's nails with your regular fingernail clippers or with nail trimmers specifically designed for cats, but you must do so carefully. If you take too much off the nail, you will cut into the "quick" which will result in bleeding.

Here are a few helpful pointers:

- Cats often have clear or white nails, so you can often see the pink quick through the nail. If you avoid the pink area, you should be safely away from the quick.
- When cutting toenails, use sharp trimmers. Dull trimmers tend to crush the nail and cause pain even if you are not in the quick.
- Have styptic powder (a clotting substance) on hand in case bleeding occurs. These products can be purchased from pet stores or your veterinarian.

If you are unsure about trimming your kitten's nails, ask your veterinary healthcare professional to do it. They will make the procedure easy and painless for you and your kitten.

Why should I have my female cat spayed?

Spaying young cats (from 3–6 months old) offers several advantages:

- Your cat will avoid heat periods, which usually begin at five to six months of age and occur every two to three weeks in an unbred cat. During the heat period, female cats encourage the attention of male cats. This behavior in female cats can be annoying as they posture and vocalize, but so is the presence of neighborhood male cats that mark the territory outside your house and fight off other suitors. Sometimes, the natural urge to mate is so strong that your indoor cat will attempt to escape outdoors to breed.
- Spaying prevents unplanned litters of kittens that often never find suitable homes.
- Spaying prior to the first heat cycle greatly reduces the risk of breast cancer.
- Spaying completely prevents any cancers of the reproductive organs.

Spaying a cat may be a routine procedure, but all surgery must be taken seriously. The correct term for spaying is ovariectomy, and refers to the complete removal of the uterus and both ovaries under general anesthesia. An overnight stay in the hospital may be advised to allow close monitoring during recovery and provide adequate pain control.

Why should I have my male cat neutered?

Neutering or castration refers to the complete removal of both testicles in a male cat, and like spaying, offers health advantages:

- Unneutered males are involved in more cat fights than their neutered friends.
- Some male cats go through a significant personality change when they mature, becoming possessive of their territory and marking it with their urine to ward off other cats. Intruding cats that disregard the urine warning may be met with aggression.
- The tomcat's urine has a very strong odor that is difficult to remove from your house if he marks his territory.
- This fighting also increases the risk of infectious diseases like FIV and Feline Leukemia.
- Unneutered males may be less friendly toward their human family members, too.

Male cats are usually neutered between 3–6 months of age under general anesthesia. Unless there are complications such as undescended testicles (cryptorchid), the cat may go home the same day.

If I choose to breed my cat, when should I start?

There are many kittens that need adoption, so unless you have specific plans for your cat's progeny, breeding is not recommended. Even if you find homes for all of the kittens, those homes are then no longer available for the many cats and kittens in shelters.

If you decide to breed your cat, she should be at least a year old. This will allow her to mature physically and minimize the physical demands of pregnancy.

Can you recommend something for pet identification?

All cats should carry ID. Even strictly-indoor cats have been known to escape the confines of their safe homes and become lost. Cats often don't tolerate collars well, so ID tags are not the *best* option for pet identification. The best way to identify your cat is to have your veterinarian insert a microchip under the skin. A microchip, pictured to the right with pennies for scale, is a tiny device that is implanted with a needle much like any other injection. The microchip contains a unique number that you register with a database along with your contact information.



Veterinary hospitals, Humane Societies and animal shelters across the country have electronic scanners that detect the presence of a microchip and access your cat's unique identification. Microchips and data registry assist the reunion of cats with their families throughout the United States and Canada. For more details, see the article [Microchipping Your Cat](#).

Adding a kitten to your family is a lot of fun. Providing your kitten with the healthcare she needs will set her up for a long, healthy, happy life.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Ernest Ward, DVM & Lynn Buzhardt, DVM

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Kitten Wellness Plans

(For Ages up to 1 year)



Spay/Neuter

- Spay/Neuter Cost
- Anesthesia
- IV catheter & fluids
- Antibiotic and Pain injection
- E-collar
- Medications to go home
and Extra Services are Not included

2 Nail Trims

Enhanced

\$700 Prepaid

\$750 Yearly

\$35 / Month

After \$315 down payment

(Discount starting at ~25% off original price of services)

5 Scheduled Exams and Rechecks (No Emergency Exams)

20% Off Exams/Rechecks Thereafter

All recommended core vaccines

- *FVRCP (4x)*
- *FeLV(2x)*
- *Rabies (1x)*

In House Fecal flotation test (2x)

Pyrantel Deworming (2x)

1 FeLV / FIV Retrovirus snap test

1 Microchip implantation and registration

6 doses of Flea Preventative

- Revolution (topical)

BASIC

\$460 Prepaid

\$500 Yearly

\$25 / month

After \$225 down payment

(Discount starting at ~25% off original price of services)

No upgrades or replacements for any services or medications are included. This is NOT pet insurance. Plan is recommended for healthy pets. Services are non-redeemable after plan's expiration date.

