

Recommendations for New Kitten Owners

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. 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 of age and are repeated every 3–4 weeks until the kitten is 16–20 weeks old.

The core vaccinations will protect your kitten from the most common diseases: feline distemper (panleukopenia), feline viral rhinotracheitis (feline herpes virus 1), calicivirus, feline leukemia (FeLV), and rabies. The first three are included in a combination vaccine (FVRCP) given every three to four weeks until your kitten reaches 16–20 weeks of age. The FeLV vaccination can be administered as early as eight weeks of age with a booster vaccine administered three to four weeks later. The rabies vaccine is usually given once, at 12–16 weeks of age.



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Non-core vaccines are not administered to every kitten but are recommended in certain areas for cats with certain lifestyles. Cats that live outdoors or in heavy-density situations like catteries are at more risk for infectious disease and often need these additional vaccines. Examples of non-core vaccines include chlamydia and bordetella.

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 following related handouts: "Vaccines for Cats", "Care for Your Pet After Vaccination", "Vaccination – Are Booster Vaccines Necessary for Cats", "Feline Panleukopenia", "Feline Herpesvirus Infection or Feline Viral Rhinotracheitis", "Feline Calicivirus Infection", "Feline Leukemia Virus Disease Complex", "Feline Leukemia Virus Vaccination", and "Rabies in Cats".

Why does my kitten need more than one vaccination?

When a kitten nurses his mother, he receives a temporary form of immunity through the colostrum, the milk that is produced in the first days after kittens are born. Colostrum contains high levels of maternal antibodies that can provide protection against diseases that the mother has been exposed to, either naturally or by vaccination. This passive immunity is useful during the first few weeks of your kitten's life but, at some point, those levels decline, and your kitten must develop his own active long-lasting immunity. Vaccinations are used to provide this long-lasting protection.

As long as the mother's antibodies are present, vaccinations are unable to stimulate the kitten's immune system because the mother's antibodies neutralize the vaccine.

Many factors determine when a kitten will be able to respond to vaccinations. These include the level of immunity in the mother at the time of birth, how many antibodies the nursing kitten absorbed, and the general health of the kitten. Since it is unknown when an individual kitten will lose its short-term maternal immunity, a series of vaccinations are given. The goal is for at least two of these to fall within the time frame when the kitten has lost immunity from its mother and has not yet been exposed to a disease. A single vaccination, even if effective, is not likely to stimulate long-term immunity, which is critically important.

The rabies vaccine is an exception to this; one injection given at the right time is enough to produce long-term immunity.

To keep up your cat's immunity through adulthood, vaccines are repeated once every one to three years depending on circumstances and the type of vaccine.

Do all kittens have worms?

Not all kittens have worms (intestinal parasites), but most of them do. The same milk that protects nursing kittens from disease and provides nutrition also carries intestinal worms and can transfer them to young kittens shortly after birth. Infection can also occur before kittens are born, as some intestinal parasites are transmitted to kittens through the bloodstream while they are still in the womb. Since kittens can become infected so early and intestinal parasites can cause severe illness, treatment needs to begin when the kitten is only a couple of weeks old.

A microscopic examination of a stool sample will identify which worms a kitten is infected with so a specific treatment plan can be prescribed. Many kittens are infected with common intestinal worms, so your veterinarian may routinely administer a broad-spectrum dewormer that is safe and effective against several species of intestinal worms. This medication, which kills adult worms, is given every two to four weeks to target the most susceptible stage of the worm's lifecycle.

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Tapeworms, one of the most common intestinal parasites in cats, do not follow this developmental pattern. Kittens do not get tapeworms from their mothers. They become infected when they swallow fleas carrying tapeworm eggs. When a cat chews or licks her coat, she 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 infected mice or birds.

There are other less common parasites that can infect kittens, such as coccidia and giardia that require special treatment. These parasites are typically found on a fecal examination done in a laboratory.

Cats remain susceptible to re-infection with tapeworms, hookworms, and roundworms, so periodic deworming throughout your cat's life is recommended. For further details about roundworms, hookworms, or tapeworms, see the handouts "Roundworm Infection in Cats", "Hookworm Infection in Cats", and "Tapeworm Infection in Cats".

What should I do if my kitten has fleas?

Contrary to popular belief, most of the flea life cycle is spent away from the cat, as only adult fleas live on an animal. The egg, larva, and pupa feed and develop in the environment. Therefore, flea control should include treatment of the environment, as well as your pet. Luckily many flea products used on your pet also help control other parts of the flea lifecycle. Be sure that any flea product you use is labeled as safe for kittens. Many of the flea control products that are safe for dogs are dangerous for kittens, so consult your veterinarian before choosing a flea control product. For more information, see the handout For more information on flea control, see the handout "Flea Control in Cats".

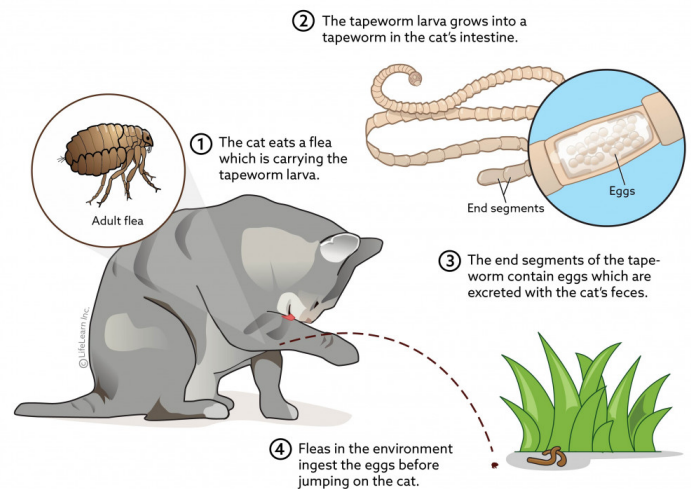
What are ear mites?

Ear mites are tiny parasites that live in the ear canal of dogs and cats. The most common sign of an ear mite infection is excessive and persistent scratching of the ears that can result in injury if not addressed promptly. Sometimes the ears will appear dirty because of a black material in the ear canal. The tiny mites can be seen with magnification, either directly in the ear with an otoscope or by examining a sample of the ear discharge under a microscope. Ear mites spend the majority of their lives within the protection of the ear canal, and transmission requires direct contact with an infected animal.

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 (see handout "Ear Mites in Cats and Dogs" for more information).

What should I feed my kitten?

For optimal development, kittens require a different balance of nutrients compared to their adult counterparts. Feeding your kitten a high-quality, nutritionally balanced diet formulated for kittens will help him mature into a healthy adult cat. While he may reach his adult size before one year of age, it is important to continue with a kitten-specific diet until one year, while his digestive, immune, and neurologic systems are still developing.



Pet food labels contain important information. AAFCO (The Association of American Feed Control Officials) has developed guidelines for the nutritional needs of pets at different life stages and for how nutrition information is to be displayed. Compliant pet food companies can print corresponding AAFCO statements on their packaging in Canada and the US. At a minimum, look for kitten foods with this statement:

"BRAND AND DIET NAME is formulated to meet the nutrition levels established by the AAFCO Cat Food Nutrient Profiles for growth."

Some pet food brands will boast this statement without formally testing their diets to prove that they do in fact meet the guidelines. You will know a brand has gone the extra mile if the statement reads:

"Animal feeding tests using AAFCO procedures substantiate that BRAND AND DIET NAME provides complete and balanced nutrition for growing kittens."

Your veterinarian can help you select the most appropriate diet for your kitten. Your kitten's caloric (energy) needs will also change throughout the development phase (especially after being spayed or neutered); your veterinarian can guide you on feeding portions for healthy weight management.

"Many cats prefer to drink from a water fountain."

To help your kitten stay hydrated, offer both kibble and canned food at mealtimes and ensure fresh drinking water is always available. Many cats prefer to drink from a water fountain.



Treats are a very important part of your kitten's diet! Try a variety of treats to see which type your kitten loves the most. You can then use this favored treat as a special reward in positive reinforcement training. You can treat your kitten when he uses the litter box, scratches his post, or goes into his carrier. To maintain the treat's value, avoid giving them "just because" or giving too many. As a rule, treats should account for no more than 10% of your kitten's daily caloric intake.

What should my kitten NOT eat?

It is best not to feed cats anything other than food that is made just for them. Many common food items can be harmful to cats, including:

- Onion (all varieties)
- Garlic
- Chocolate
- Raw egg, meat, bone, and yeast dough
- Grapes and raisins
- Dairy containing lactose
- Alcoholic and caffeinated beverages

While not food items for us, cats enjoy munching on plants and flowers. Some are toxic to cats and should either be kept out of the home or inaccessible. Common examples include:

- Lilies
- Tulips
- Daffodils
- Marijuana
- Aloe vera
- Cilantro
- Azalea

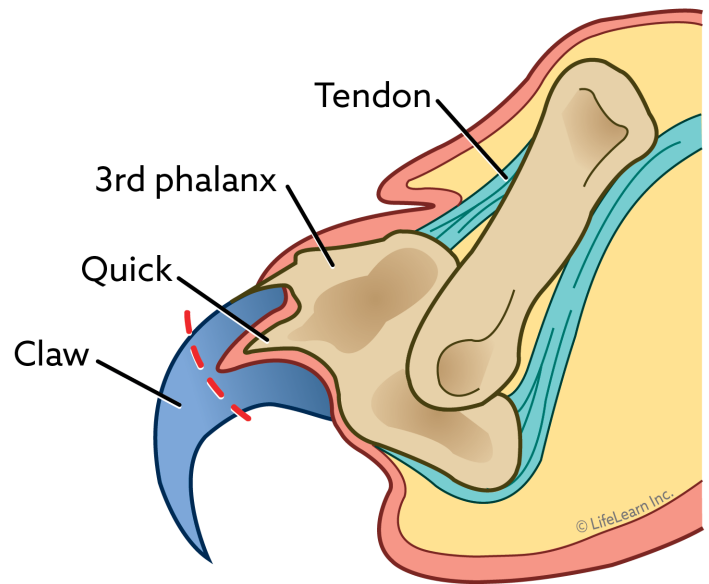
There are several other plants and flowers that are harmful to cats, so if you are not sure about some of those in your home, consult your veterinarian for advice. Because many cats enjoy how plants feel in their mouths, you can offer “cat grass”, which is grown from any combination of oat, wheat, barley, and rye seeds.

How do I trim my kitten's nails?

You can trim your kitten's nails with regular fingernail clippers or with nail trimmers 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 and pain.

Here are a few helpful pointers:

- Cats often have clear or white nails, so you can see the pink quick through the nail. This is a small pink triangle visible near the base of the nail. Avoid this pink area to stay safely away from the quick.
- Use sharp trimmers. Dull trimmers can pinch or 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. This product is available at pet stores or from your veterinarian. In an emergency, corn starch or a bar of soap can be used to help stop the bleeding.
- Playing with your kitten's feet and rewarding her with treats during and after nail trims is a good way to help encourage good behavior for future nail trims.

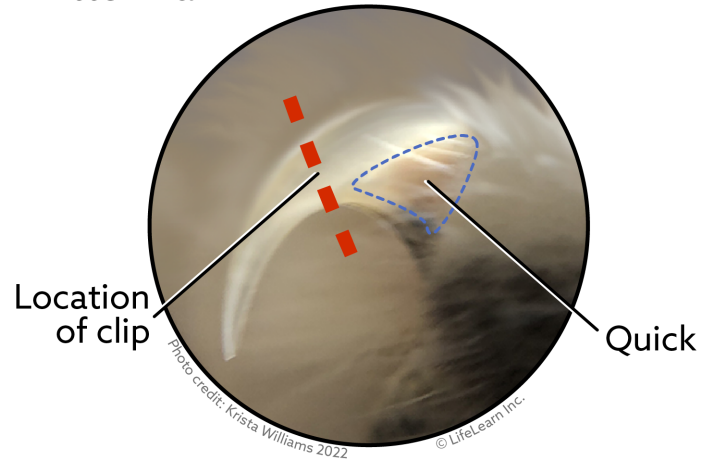


The dash line shows the location where the claw can safely be cut.

Scratching is a normal cat behavior. If your kitten is exhibiting scratching behavior that is undesirable to you, consult your veterinarian for recommendations to properly enrich your cat's environment. Scratching posts, boxes, and other scratching products should be placed in multiple locations in your home.

Declawing can have serious harmful physical and behavioral outcomes for cats and multiple cities, counties, states, and countries have banned the procedure. If you are unsure about trimming your kitten's nails, ask your veterinary healthcare professionals for help. They can teach you how to make the procedure easy and painless – for you and your kitten.

Kitten nail



Should I have my female cat spayed?

Spaying is the surgical removal of the uterus and the ovaries and eliminates the cat's estrous (heat) cycles. Spaying young cats (from three to six months old) offers several advantages:

- When a cat is in heat, she will posture and vocalize to attract nearby male suitors, which can be an annoyance to owners, and the urge to mate will be so strong that she may constantly attempt to escape the home.
- It eliminates the risk of unplanned pregnancy and helps control cat overpopulation problems.
- Spaying prior to the first heat cycle greatly reduces her risk of breast cancer.

Spaying prevents cancers and infections of the reproductive organs. See the handout "Spaying in Cats" for more information.

Should I have my male cat neutered?

Neutering (castration) refers to the complete removal of the testicles in a male cat, and like spaying, offers many advantages:

- Unneutered males are involved in more cat fights than their neutered friends. Fighting increases the risk of infectious diseases and serious injuries.
- Some male cats go through a significant personality change as 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.
- Even if he is kept inside (which also prevents unplanned pregnancies), the urges to find a mate and defend territory will still be strong and can result in constant stress and frustration.
- The urine of an unneutered male cat has a very strong odor that is difficult to remove. Unneutered males will spray inside the house in places other than the litter box.
- Some unneutered males may be less friendly toward their human family members, too.

See the handout "Neutering in Cats" for more information.

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

There are many kittens that need homes, so unless you have specific plans for the kittens, breeding is not recommended. Even if you find homes for all the kittens, those homes are then no longer available for the many cats and kittens that waiting in shelters. If you decide to breed your cat, she should be at least one year old. This will allow her to mature physically and minimize the physical demands of pregnancy. Many breeds have pre-existing genetic conditions that need to be considered and screened for before breeding can occur. Speak with your veterinarian to make sure you practice responsible breeding techniques.

What kind of identification should my cat have?

All cats should have identification. Even strictly indoor cats have been known to escape the confines of their safe homes and become lost. Cats often do not tolerate collars well and they have the potential to cause injury, so ID tags are not the best option for pet identification.

The most widely recommended pet identification device is the microchip. This tiny device is implanted with a needle, much like administering an injection. The microchip will contain important information about your cat and how to contact you. A special scanner can detect these chips; veterinary hospitals, humane societies, and animal shelters have these scanners. A national registry assists in the identification and return of microchipped pets throughout the United States and Canada. The microchip can be quickly implanted during any regular veterinary appointment.

Adding a kitten to your family is a lot of fun. Remember that kittens are very energetic, so be prepared to build play routines into your daily routine. Discourage play that encourages your kitten to play with your hands directly and offer 'kitten safe', stimulating toys. Providing your kitten with the health care she needs will set her up for a long, healthy, happy life.

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