



NORTHPARK Animal Hospital

RAISING KITTENS

Raising kittens can be an extremely rewarding experience or it may produce frustration and failure. The following information is provided in order to increase your chances of success.

What do I do to care for the newborn kittens?

The mother will spend most of her time with the kittens during the next few days. The kittens need to be kept warm and to nurse frequently; they should be checked every few hours to make certain that they are warm and well fed. The mother should be checked to make certain that she is producing adequate milk.

If the mother does not stay in the box, the kittens' temperature must be monitored. If the kittens are cold, supplemental heating should be provided. During the first four days of life, the newborns' box should be maintained at 85° to 90°F (29.4° to 32.2°C). The temperature may gradually be decreased to 80°F (26.7°C) by the seventh to tenth day and to 72°F (22.2°C) by the end of the fourth week. If the litter is large, the temperature need not be as high. As kittens huddle together, their body heat provides additional warmth.

If the mother feels the kittens are in danger or if there is too much light, she may become anxious. Placing a sheet or cloth over most of the top of the box to obscure much of the light may resolve the problem. An enclosed box is also a solution. Some cats, especially first-time mothers, are more anxious than others. Such cats may attempt to hide their young, even from her owner. Moving from place to place may continue and will endanger the kittens if they are placed in a cold or drafty location. Cats with this behavior should be caged in a secluded area. This type of mother has also been known to kill her kittens as a means of "protecting" them from danger.

What are the signs that the kittens are not doing well and what do I do?

Kittens should eat or sleep 90% of the time during the first two weeks. If they are crying during or after eating, they are usually becoming ill or are not getting adequate milk. A newborn kitten is very susceptible to infections and can die within 24 hours. If excessive crying occurs, the mother and entire litter should be promptly examined by a veterinarian.

When the milk supply is inadequate, supplemental feeding one to three times per day is recommended and should be performed on any litter with more than five kittens. There are several commercial formulas available that are made to supply the needs of kittens. They require no preparation other than warming. They should be warmed to 95° to 100°F (35° to 37.8°C) before feeding. Its temperature can be tested on one's forearm; it should be about the same as one's skin. An alternative is canned goats' milk that is available in most grocery stores. The commercial products have directions concerning feeding amounts. If the kittens are still nursing from their mother, the amounts recommended will be excessive. Generally, 1/3 to 1/2 of the listed amount should be the daily goal. Supplemental feeding may be continued until the kittens are old enough to eat kitten food.

If the mother does not produce milk or her milk becomes infected, the kittens will also cry. If this occurs, the entire litter could die within 24 to 48 hours. Total replacement feeding, using the mentioned products, or adopting the kittens to another nursing mother is usually necessary. If replacement feeding is chosen, the amounts of milk listed on the product should be fed. Kittens less than two weeks of age should be fed every 3-4 hours. Kittens 2-4 weeks of age do well with feedings every 6-8 hours. Weaning, as described below, should begin at 3-4 weeks of age.

What should I expect during the kittens' first few weeks of life?

For the first month of life kittens require very little care from the owner because their mother will feed and care for them. They are born with their eyes closed, but they will open in 7 to 14 days. If swelling or bulging is noted under the eyelids, they should be opened gently. A cotton ball dampened with warm water may be used to assist opening the lids. If the swelling is due to infection, pus will exit the open eyelids and should be treated as prescribed by a veterinarian. If the eyes have not opened within 14 days of age, they should be opened by a veterinarian.

Kittens should be observed for their rate of growth. They should double their birth weight in about one week.

At two weeks of age, kittens should be alert and trying to stand. At three weeks, they generally try to climb out of their box. At four weeks, all of the kittens should be able to walk, run, and play.

Kittens should begin eating solid food about 3½ to 4½ weeks of age. Initially, one of the milk replacers or cow's milk diluted 50:50 with water should be placed in a flat saucer. The kittens' noses should be dipped into the milk two or three times per day until they begin to lap; this usually takes 1-3 days. Next, canned kitten food should be placed in the milk until it is soggy. As the kittens lap the milk, they will also ingest the food. The amount of milk should be decreased daily until they are eating the canned food with little or no moisture added; this should occur by 4 to 6 weeks of age.

I have heard of milk fever. What exactly is it?

Eclampsia or milk fever is a depletion of calcium from the mother due to heavy milk production. It generally occurs when the kittens are 3-5 weeks old (just before weaning) and most often to mothers with large litters. The mother has muscle spasms resulting in rigid legs, spastic movements, and heavy panting. This can be fatal in 30-60 minutes, so a veterinarian should be consulted immediately.

Do kittens need a special diet?

Diet is extremely important for a growing kitten. There are many commercial foods specially formulated for kittens. These foods meet their unique nutritional requirements and should be fed until 12 months of age. Kitten foods are available in dry and canned formulations. Dry foods are less expensive and can be left in the bowl for the kitten to eat at will. Kittens will eat small amounts as often as 12 times during the day. Canned foods offer a change and are just as nutritious.

We recommend that you buy FOOD FORMULATED FOR KITTENS. Adult formulations are not recommended since they do not provide the nutrition required for a kitten. Advertisements tend to promote taste rather than nutrition so one should be careful that their influence on purchasing habits is not detrimental to one's cat. Generic foods should be avoided. Table food is not recommended; although often more appealing than cat food, balanced, complete nutrition is usually compromised. Dog food should not be fed to cats since it is deficient in vital nutrients and the amount of protein required by kittens and adult cats.

We recommend that you buy NAME BRAND FOOD. It is generally a good idea to avoid generic brands of food. We recommend that you only buy food that has the AAFCO (American Association of Feed Control Officials) certification. Usually, you can find this information very easily on the food label. AAFCO is an organization that oversees the entire pet food industry. It does not endorse any particular food, but it will tell you if the food has met the minimum requirements for nutrition, which are set by the industry. Most of the commercial pet foods will have the AAFCO label. In Canada, look for foods approved by the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA).

When should vaccinations begin?

Kittens are provided some immunity to feline diseases before and shortly after birth. The mother's antibodies cross the placenta and enter the kittens' circulation. Some antibodies are also provided in the mother's milk. These "maternal antibodies" protect the kittens against the diseases to which the mother is immune. This explains why it is desirable to booster the mother's vaccinations within a few months prior to breeding.

Although very protective, maternal antibodies last for only a few weeks; after this time, the kitten becomes susceptible to disease. The vaccination program should be started at about 6 to 8 weeks of age. Kittens should be vaccinated against feline enteritis (distemper), respiratory organisms (rhinotracheitis, calici, and pneumonitis), and rabies. If the kitten will be allowed to go outdoors or to be in contact with cats that go outdoors, leukemia and feline infectious peritonitis (FIP) vaccine should also be considered. Your cat's needs will be discussed at the time of the first visit for vaccinations.

Maternal antibodies are passed in the mother's milk only during the first 1-3 days after delivery. If, for any reason, the kittens do not nurse during this important period of time, their vaccinations should begin about 2 to 4 weeks of age, depending on likely disease exposure. A veterinarian can make specific recommendations for each particular situation.

Do all kittens have worms?

Intestinal parasites ("worms") are common in kittens. Symptoms include general poor condition, chronic soft or bloody stools, loss of appetite, a pot-bellied appearance, loss of luster of the haircoat, and weight loss. Some parasites are transmitted from the mother to her offspring and others are carried by fleas. Some are transmitted through the stool of an infected cat. Very few of these parasites are visible in the stool, so their eggs must be detected by the veterinarian with a microscope.

A microscopic examination of the feces will reveal the eggs of most of these parasites. Generally this test should be performed at the time of the first vaccinations. However, it may be performed as early as three weeks of age if a parasite problem is suspected. Treatment is based on the type of parasites found although some veterinarians elect to deworm all kittens because they know that fecal tests can be falsely negative. Your veterinarian should be consulted for specific recommendations for your kittens.