

**PREGNANT CATS**

# Reproduction

Female cats – queens – can become sexually mature from just four months of age. If they are not neutered they have regularly be in heat showing restlessness, calling and wailing, and presenting the rear, in attempts to attract a mate and can last between a few days and a week, reoccurring every few weeks during the breeding season (normally February – August). During these cycles, a queen will be very attractive to unneutered male tom cats which can detect her scent from several miles away and will make great efforts to reach her.

Queens are not selective in their choice of mate and will accept advances made by any tom, including relatives. Allowing an unneutered female outside – or indoors with an unneutered tom – will put her at risk of pregnancy as well as putting both her and any kittens at risk of infectious diseases that unneutered roaming toms may carry.

**Contrary to popular belief, there are no health or welfare benefits**

# Pregnancy & Care

Pregnancy lasts approx 63-65 days – around nine weeks. If a female does come into heat again after mating, this can lead to further foetuses being conceived, hence kittens born with different fathers!

Pregnancy can be diagnosed by the vet using abdominal palpation from around three to four weeks of age or by using ultrasound. Pinking up – enlargement and reddening of the teats may be seen from around three to four weeks of pregnancy.

Behaviour changes may be seen in the last week of pregnancy. Queens will usually search for a suitable place to give birth. Ideally, they should have a quiet, clean and warm area away from the family and other pets at least one to two weeks before the expected date for birth.

Mummy cat will need to eat more than usual, especially in the last weeks of pregnancy when she needs approximately 25 per cent more food. Feed her kitten food in regular meals right through lactation until the kittens are weaned, as they use more than double their normal energy requirements when suckling kittens. Pregnant, birthing and lactating queens should have access to plenty of water.

# Birth of kittens

It is best to watch the cat quietly from a distance, taking care not to disturb her or make her anxious. Always contact a vet if any problems occur. Birth/kittening, is divided into three stages, and the second and third stages are repeated for each kitten.

**First stage** – can last up to 35 hours – and is usually shorter in queens which have had kittens before:

🐾there are intermittent contractions, but NO straining is seen

🐾being restless and usually repeated visits to the bed area

🐾late in the first stage, some scratching of the bedding and panting may be seen

**Second stage** – lasts five to 30 minutes for each kitten:

🐾stronger contractions

🐾foetal membranes appear briefly at the vulva and burst. This is usually cleared up by the cat

🐾active straining starts and the kitten usually comes out head first

🐾once the head is out, one or two strains from the cat should expel the kitten

🐾the mother breaks the bag and chews through the cord and licks the kitten to clean it and encourages it to start to breathe

**Third stage** – passage of the membranes and dark flesh mass of the placenta or afterbirth:

🐾this usually follows immediately, although occasionally two kittens are born followed by two sets of membranes

🐾if you can, count the number of placenta to ensure one is passed for each kitten. If they are not all passed within four to six hours, please contact vets for advice. Obviously keep in mind, the queen will usually eat the placenta as this is to hide evidence of the birth to protect her offspring

🐾a red-brown discharge may be seen for up to three weeks after the birth. If it is green or foul smelling, this is abnormal – although there may be a small amount of greenish discharge after the kitten or placenta

Delivery between kittens can be between 10 to 60 minutes, where stage two and three are repeated. Birth is usually complete within six hours but can last up to 12 hours. Anything between one and nine kittens can be born, most commonly four to six. First-time queens usually have a small litter size. When the birth is finished the mother will settle and allow the kittens to feed.

It’s good practice to have clean towels, hot water bottle, feeding bottle or syringe and some specialist substitute cat milk replacement ready in advance – **not cow or goat milk**. If all goes well, leave the cat alone, ensure there is access to food, water and a litter tray, without any risk of the kittens becoming trapped or drowning.

**What can go wrong?**

In most cases the cat will manage without any help. However, difficult births can occur and if in any doubt contact vets for advice. Here are some things you can do to help:

🐾if a kitten is seen partly out, but the mother is very tired and the kitten isn’t passed within a few seconds, gently try to pull it out by pulling downwards very gently, with clean hands and seek veterinary advice

🐾if the mother does not clean the kitten, quickly & quietly clear the membranes from its head with clean, soft kitchen roll. Wipe its nose and open the mouth to clear it. Rub the kitten in small circular movements to get it breathing

🐾if the mother does not bite through the cord, you can tie it off twice with clean thread approx 3cm from the kitten’s body and gently tear between the two ties or cut with sterile scissors. Clean hands are essential

🐾provide warmth if the mother is avoiding the kittens, with a warm, **well covered** hot water bottle

🐾if you’ve had to intervene, please seek veterinary advice straight away, as the kittens may be more at risk of infection or being injured or rejected and not suckled or kept warm by the queen

🐾if the first stage is lasting longer than 24 hours without any sign of straining

🐾if the cat has been straining for more than 30 minutes without producing anything, as this could indicate an obstruction (a very large kitten)

🐾if the first kitten has arrived and no further kittens appear after an hour

🐾if the cat suddenly seems weak

🐾if there is excessive bloody or greenish discharge without a kitten. However, there may be a greenish discharge after the kitten or with the afterbirth

🐾if a kitten is stuck half-way out and cannot be delivered with gentle traction

In some cases, a caesarean section may be required to deliver the kittens.

# Once kittens have been born

They should start to suckle from their mother almost immediately. If they haven’t started after 30mins, gently guide them towards the teats. If they don’t start feeding after that, consult your vet as you may need to start giving a substitute milk replacer to the kitten – follow the instructions carefully. Remember, new-borns cannot go more than a few hours without milk.

The queen should be carefully monitored following the birth.

Veterinary advice should be sought if any problems are seen, these may include:

**🐾bleeding** from the vagina or unusual vaginal discharge

**🐾prolapse** of the uterus (womb) – straining can occasionally cause the uterus to be pushed out

**🐾disturbed behaviour** – constant interruptions or pain can cause the queen to kill her offspring. The risk of this is reduced if mum is familiar with her environment, the surroundings are quiet and she is in good health. Be very calm and quiet and do not disturb a mother with very young kittens unless necessary and keep other pets away

🐾if the queen is not comfortable and feels she or the kittens are at risk of threat, she may try to move the kittens in her mouth to a preferred location. It is important to ensure the queen has access to a warm, clean and quiet place. She may appreciate a cardboard box lined with soft blankets and sheets to hide the kittens in.

🐾ignoring kittens

**🐾mastitis** – infection of usually one mammary gland, which becomes hot, painful and enlarged.

**🐾poor appetite, excessive drinking or vomiting**

**🐾awkward or clumsy movement, twitching or collapse**

# Care of newborn kittens

## Nutrition

The first milk produced – colostrum – is rich in antibodies and will help to protect kittens against diseases. These antibodies last for six weeks or more. Kittens can only absorb colostrum during their first 16 to 24 hours of life and they should feed within two hours of birth. It is essential that they receive this colostrum to protect them against disease. If for any reason a kitten does not receive the first milk, speak to your vet.

Newborn kittens should feed every two to three hours. Kittens receiving adequate nourishment from the queen will sleep in between feeds and do not need additional nutrition until three to four weeks old. If not receiving sufficient food from the queen they may constantly cry and seek the teats.

Distressed newborn kittens may be restless, without sleeping for prolonged periods, cry excessively, leave the queen and kittening area, appear neglected by the queen or stop feeding and have a reduced sucking reflex. Consult your vet as they will require additional care and supplementary feeding.

If the queen is relaxed, it is recommended to gently weigh kittens at birth, when they are usually between 90 and 110g each. Keep records and weigh the kittens daily to ensure they are gaining around 10-15g each per day, doubling their birth weight by two weeks old.

## Weaning – the transition of kittens from the queen’s milk to solid food

Weaning can begin at three to four weeks of age but will take several weeks:

* start with diluted specialised kitten milk replacement in a shallow bowl. Always follow the product’s instructions very carefully to ensure the correct amount and dilution is used and at the correct temperature. Place a small amount on the mouth and gradually encourage the kitten to lap directly from the bowl. Offer several times a day
* add a small amount of wet kitten food to the milk over time
* gradually increase the ratio of food to milk until the kitten is eating solid food
* this whole process should happen gradually over three to four weeks while kittens also continue to suckle, until they are feeding freely. Monitor each kitten through this time to ensure they are each feeding effectively

Separating the queen from the kittens:

* once fully weaned, it is a good idea to allow the queen to gradually spend time apart from the kittens each day to help her milk to gradually dry up. However, the kittens will still be learning from her, so kittens should not be fully separated from the queen until at least eight weeks of age. It may be best not to separate the kittens from the queen all at once as her mammary glands may become engorged. A common reaction is to try to mother something else, such as a cuddly toy. Instead gradually separate them over a period of several days
* some behavioural issues may be seen when kittens are fully separated from their queen and litter mates too early – for example the retention of juvenile behaviours such as kneading or sucking may be seen in cats separated before eight weeks of age.

The queen can be neutered while she is still with or feeding the kittens as long as the surgical wound will not be affected by enlarged mammary glands. Normally the spay wound is on her side. You do not need to wait until her milk has dried up, but usually best to wait until the kittens are weaned, if you don’t get them neutered at this stage then the queen can get pregnant again as early as one to two weeks after giving birth, so it is advisable to get her neutered promptly and kittens should be neutered around four months of age. If then males should be separated from females and the queen to prevent in-breeding. Ask your vet for help with sexing the kittens, if needed.

Most situation kittens will have their nutritional needs met by their mother. However, if the queen dies, rejects the kittens or is too ill to support them, assistance will be required. It can be very risky to rear orphaned kittens using another lactating queen as she may not accept them, neglect or attack them and there is the risk of spreading infectious diseases – some of which may be fatal. Seek veterinary advice and discuss hand rearing.

Hand reared kittens need:

🐾someone who can attend to them throughout the day and night

🐾a clean, warm environment like a cat basket with lots of bedding and a soft toy to snuggle up to

🐾A safe source of heat

🐾strict hygiene routine to prevent disease

🐾consistent feeding regime. New-borns must be fed every two to three hours

🐾stimulating to pass urine and faeces before and after each feed until at least three weeks old

🐾socialised with positive experiences and taught normal behaviour that kittens would normally learn from their queen

# Hand feeding

Always use substitute kitten milk formulated specifically for kittens – seek your vet’s advice. Cow or goat’s milk should not be used as kittens cannot easily digest this. Overfeeding can be as dangerous as underfeeding.

The milk should be warmed to approximately 35°c. Test it carefully by putting a drop of milk on the inside of your wrist – you will not feel it when it is the right temperature. It is important that the milk is not too hot or too cold.

Feeding should be done with great care as it is easy for kittens to inhale the milk and develop pneumonia which can be fatal. Specialised feeding bottles and teats can usually be bought from your vet.

If a kitten refuses to feed, prompt veterinary care is required. Kittens have no reserves and will deteriorate very rapidly.

# Toileting for hand rearing

Kittens are unable to pass urine or faeces without assistance for the first few weeks of their lives – the area around the bottom and the urinary opening of the kitten needs to be stimulated using a slightly damp piece of cotton wool before and after each feed to encourage toileting. The mother would normally do this by licking the rear end of kittens before, during and after feeding.

From about four weeks of age, simply placing them in the litter tray should be enough to encourage them to pass urine and faeces on their own. Ensure the litter tray has shallow sides so the kittens can access it easily and provide litter with a sandy texture.

Normal faeces have the consistency of toothpaste. If faeces become very hard, making the kitten strain excessively or if a kitten does not pass any motions for a day, veterinary advice should be sought.

Diarrhoea can be caused by overfeeding, by giving too concentrated a solution of milk replacer, or by an infection. A kitten’s condition can deteriorate rapidly, therefore it is best to consult your vet.

Hygiene is of utmost importance for hand reared kittens, as they are very prone to infection. Kittens that have received no colostrum from their mother will have little or no immunity to disease. Some feline infectious diseases can be fatal or lead to lifelong health issues.

Personal hygiene when preparing feeds and toileting kittens should be excellent and utensils used for preparing or administering the milk should be sterilised.

Kittens cannot regulate their own temperature well. If the mother is not there to keep them warm, ensure that newborn kittens are towel dried quickly, provide a source of warmth such as a covered heat pad or well wrapped hot water bottle. Make sure these are not too hot and that there is somewhere for the kittens to move away to should they overheat

# Normal development

Birth weight – approx 90 to 110g – dependent on breed and number of kittens in the litter

kittens should gain around 50 to 100g/week (10-15g/day) and should double their birth weight by two weeks of age

Eyes are closed at birth and can open from 2 to 15 days old. The coloured part of the eye stays a bluey colour until four to six weeks old before changing colour permanently

Weaning starts at around three to four weeks old

Kittens can start to spend short periods of time away from the queen from six to seven weeks of age

Kittens should not be fully separated from the queen until at least eight weeks of age

Vaccination can usually start at nine weeks of age – worm and flea treatment is recommended before this

Sexual maturity is reached from four months of age

Kittens lose their 26 baby teeth by six months of age