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Recommendations for New Kitten Owners

We would like to congratulate you on the acquisition of your new kitten. Owning a cat can be an extremely rewarding experience, but it is also a large responsibility. We hope this handout will give you the information needed to make some good decisions regarding your kitten.

First let us say that we are grateful that you have chosen us to help you with your kitten's health care. If you have questions concerning any subject related to your kitten's health, please feel free to call our hospital. Our veterinarians and staff will be happy to help you.

How should I introduce my kitten to its new environment?

A cat is naturally inclined to investigate its new surroundings. It is suggested that the kitten's area of exploration be initially limited so that you can supervise its activities. After confining the cat to one room for the first few days, you should slowly allow access to other areas of the home.



How should I introduce my new kitten to my other cat?

Most kittens receive a hostile reception from other household pets, especially from another cat. The other cat usually sees no need for a kitten in the household, and these feelings are reinforced if it senses that special favoritism is being shown to the kitten. The existing cat must not feel that it is necessary to compete for food or attention. The new kitten should have its own food bowl and it should not be permitted to eat from the other cat's bowl. Although it is natural to spend time holding and cuddling the kitten, the existing cat will quickly sense that it is being neglected. The new kitten needs lots of love and attention, but the existing cat should not be slighted. In fact, the transition will be smoother if the existing cat is given more attention than normal.

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

1. The existing cat will remain hostile to the kitten. Fighting may occasionally occur, especially if both try to eat out of the same bowl at the same time. This is an unlikely occurrence if competition for food and affection are minimized during the first few weeks.
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. 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.

What type of play behavior should I expect from a kitten?

Encouraging appropriate play activities is very important from the first day in your home. 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 mice toys, small

balls, and feather toys. Kittens should always be supervised if playing with string or ribbons because these items can cause serious intestinal problems if they are swallowed. Any toy that is small enough to be swallowed should also be avoided.

Can I discipline a kitten?

Disciplining a young kitten may be necessary if its behavior towards people or property is inappropriate, but harsh punishment should be avoided. For most kittens, hand clapping and using shaker cans or horns can be intimidating enough to inhibit undesirable behavior when you are present. 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 objects in the direction of the kitten to startle, but not hit, and using booby traps that make loud noises. Remote punishment is preferred because the kitten will then associate punishment with the undesirable act and not with you.

When should my kitten be vaccinated?

There are many diseases that are fatal to cats. Fortunately, we have the ability to prevent many of these by the use of vaccines. The following vaccines are available for your kitten:

FVRCP – This stands for Feline Viral Rhinotracheitis Calicivirus Panleukopenia. In order to be effective, this vaccine should be given every 3-4 weeks beginning at about 6 to 8 weeks of age and continuing until your kitten is about 16 weeks of age. This schedule may vary depending on your pet's individual needs.

- Feline Viral Rhinotracheitis is also called feline herpesvirus. It is a virus that causes sneezing, nasal discharge, and red, weepy eyes.
- Calicivirus is a virus that causes sneezing, nasal discharge, and ulcers in the mouth.
- Panleukopenia is a virus that causes severe, life threatening diarrhea.

Rabies – Rabies causes fatal brain disease. This vaccine is given at 12 to 16 weeks of age. In Virginia, rabies vaccination is legally required to be given by 20 weeks of age.

Feline leukemia – This is a virus that causes immune suppression and sometimes cancer. It is passed by close physical contact with infected cats. Therefore this vaccination is recommended for cats that roam outdoors but is not necessary for cats that live indoors only. This vaccine should be given twice 3 to 4 weeks apart and is usually given at 12 and 16 weeks of age.

There are several other vaccinations available for cats. We do not currently advise vaccination for feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) because vaccination can make diagnosis difficult, FIV is only transmitted by close physical contact with infected cats, and there is a low incidence (1-2%). There is a vaccine available for feline infectious peritonitis (FIP); this vaccine is not recommended due to concerns about its safety and efficacy.

Why does my kitten need more than one vaccination for feline distemper, upper respiratory infections, and leukemia?

When the kitten first nurses its mother, it receives a temporary form of immunity through colostrum, or the milk that is produced by its mother for a few days after birth. This immunity is in the form of 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, while its immune system is maturing, but, at some point, this immunity fails

and the kitten must produce its own, longer-lasting “active” immunity. Vaccinations are used for this purpose. As long as the mother's antibodies are present, they will cause interference and prevent the immune system from responding completely to the vaccines.

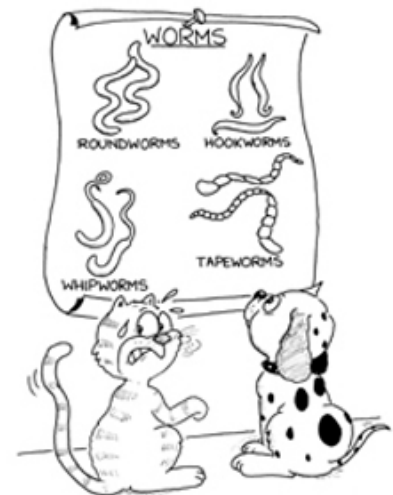
Many factors determine when the kitten will be able to respond to vaccines. These include the level of immunity in the mother cat, how much of the antibody has been absorbed by the nursing kitten, and the general health and nutrition level of the kitten. Since we do not know when an individual kitten will lose its short-term immunity, we give a series of vaccinations. We hope that at least two of these will fall in the window of time when the kitten has lost the immunity from its mother but has not yet been exposed to disease. 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 to this, since one injection given at the proper age and time is enough to produce lasting immunity.

Do all kittens have worms?

Intestinal parasites are common in kittens. Kittens can become infected with parasites almost as soon as they are born, since one of the most common sources of roundworm infection in kittens is the mother's milk. Some of these parasites can also be transmitted to humans.

A fecal exam is a microscopic examination of a stool sample that helps to identify parasites such as roundworms and hookworms. This exam is recommended for all kittens at their first visit, at 6 months of age, and then yearly thereafter. In addition, all kittens should be treated with a deworming product to eliminate the most common types of worms. We do this because our deworming medication has no side-effects and because your kitten does not pass worm eggs every day so the stool sample may not detect worms that are present. Deworming is done at the first visit and repeated in about three weeks. It is important that it be repeated because the deworming medication only kills the adult worms. Within three to four weeks, the larval stages will become adults and need to be treated. Periodic deworming throughout the cat's life may be recommended for cats that go outdoors.



Tapeworms are one of the most common intestinal parasites of cats. Kittens usually become infected with tapeworms when they swallow fleas. The eggs of the tapeworm live inside the flea. When the cat chews or licks its skin as a flea bites, it often swallows the flea. The flea is digested within the cat's intestine. The tapeworm then hatches and anchors itself to the intestinal lining. Each exposure to fleas may result in a new infection, which can occur in as little as two weeks. Cats may also get a tapeworm infection by eating mice or birds; the life cycle of these tapeworm species are similar to that of the flea tapeworm.

Cats infected with tapeworms will pass small segments of the worms on their stool. The segments are white in color and look like grains of rice. They are about 1/8 inch (3 mm) long and may be seen crawling on the surface of the stool. They may also stick to the hair under the tail. If that occurs, they will dry out, shrink to about half their size, and become pale yellow in color.

Tapeworm segments do not pass every day or in every stool sample; therefore, inspection of several consecutive bowel movements may be needed to find them. We may examine a stool sample in our office and not find them, and then you may find them the next day. If you find them at any time, please notify us so we may provide the appropriate drug for treatment. Ideally, you should bring in the worm segments so that we can identify them.

What is the FeLV/FIV test?

This is a blood test to screen cats and kittens for feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV). These two viruses can cause serious and even fatal diseases in cats and kittens. Mothers can transmit these viruses to their kittens before or after they are born. There is no cure for these viruses. They are passed among adult cats only by close physical contact. Therefore, all kittens should be tested to ensure they are healthy and free of the viruses. Kittens and cats that test positive should be kept away from other cats and never let outside.

How important are heartworms to cats?

Heartworms are passed by mosquitoes and are an important and well known problem for dogs. What you may not realize is that heartworms can also affect cats. Heartworms affect cats differently than dogs. Many times signs of exposure or infection may not be obvious, but heartworms can cause asthma, other lung disease, vomiting, and even sudden death in cats. Fortunately there are several safe and effective heartworm preventatives for cats. Caring Hands Animal Hospital of Merrifield recommends using Revolution Plus (a liquid applied to a single spot on the skin) once a month to prevent heartworms in cats.

What can be done about fleas?

Fleas cause itching and skin disease in cats and can even transmit some intestinal parasites. In addition, fleas do not stay on your kitten all of their time; occasionally, they jump off and seek another host. Therefore, it is important to kill fleas on your new kitten before they can become established in your house. We recommend using Revolution or Frontline for control of fleas. Revolution also helps prevent heartworm disease, intestinal parasites, and ear mites. Both products are liquids liquid that are applied to a single spot on your cat's skin once a month.

Why should I have my female cat spayed?

The medical term for spaying is ovariectomy and it refers to the complete removal of the uterus and the ovaries. Spaying offers several advantages.

The female's heat periods, which usually begin at 8 to 12 months of age, occur every two to three weeks unless she is bred. She will be receptive, or "in heat" for part of this time each cycle. Mating behavior in female cats can be annoying, and neighborhood male cats may be attracted from blocks away, fighting or marking their territory outside your house while she is in heat. In many cases, the urge to mate is so strong that your indoor cat will attempt to escape outdoors to breed. Despite your best efforts, it is possible that your cat will become pregnant. Spaying prevents heat periods and unplanned litters of kittens.

It has been proven that as the female cat ages she will have a significant risk of developing breast cancer or a uterine infection called *pyometra* if she has not been spayed. Spaying before she has any heat cycles will virtually eliminate the chances of developing breast cancer or uterine infection. If you do not plan to breed your cat, we strongly recommend that she



be spayed before her first heat period. This surgical procedure can be done anytime after she is five to six months old.

Why should I have my male cat neutered?

Neutering or castration refers to the complete removal of both testicles in a male cat. Neutering offers several advantages. Male cats go through a significant personality change when they mature. They become very possessive of their territory and mark it with their urine to ward off other cats. The tomcat's urine develops a very strong odor that will be almost impossible to remove from your house. They also try to constantly enlarge their territory, which means they will fight continually with other male cats in the neighborhood. Fighting can result in severe infections and abscesses in cats and makes for conflict with neighbors. We strongly urge you to have your cat neutered at about five to six months of age. If he should begin to spray his urine before that time, he should be neutered immediately. The longer he sprays or fights, the less likely neutering is to stop it.

Can you recommend something for pet identification?

The most widely recommend pet identification device is the microchip. This tiny device is implanted with a needle much like administering an injection. A special scanner can detect these chips; veterinary hospitals, humane societies, and animal shelters across the country have these scanners. A national registry assists in the identification and return of microchipped pets throughout the United States and Canada. We strongly recommend microchipping all pets.

There are lots of choices of cat foods. What should I feed my kitten?

Diet is extremely important for the proper growth and development of your kitten. We recommend a premium quality food made by a national pet food company (not a generic or local brand) and a diet made specifically for kittens. This should be fed until your kitten is about 10 to 12 months of age. We recommend that you only buy food that has been certified by an independent 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. It does not endorse any particular food, but it will certify that the food has met the minimum requirements for nutrition. Interpreting pet food labels is difficult because the information is limited and can be misleading. The best measure of a pet food's quality is how your puppy responds to the food. Proper weight, normal stool, no vomiting, and a healthy coat are all signs of a quality diet.

Cat foods are available in dry, canned, and semi-moist formulations. Any of these formulations is acceptable, as long as the label states that the food is intended for growth (or is a kitten food), 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 a measured, controlled amount can be left in the cat's bowl at all times. If given the choice, the average cat will eat a mouthful of food about 12-20 times per day. Feeding dry food can help limit plaque buildup on the teeth.

Semi-moist foods may be acceptable, depending on their quality. The texture may be more appealing to some cats, and they often have a stronger odor and flavor. However, semi-moist foods are usually high in



sugar, and if they are fed exclusively, can cause the cat to develop a very finicky appetite.

Canned foods are another choice for feeding your kitten, but are considerably more expensive than either of the other forms of food. Canned foods contain a high percentage of water, and their texture, odor and taste are very appealing to most cats. The additional water content can be beneficial for the health of cat's bladders and kidneys. In addition, canned foods may have a higher percentage of protein with fewer carbohydrates, which is closer to the natural diet of cats. However, canned food will dry out or spoil if left out for prolonged periods of time; it is more suitable for meal feeding rather than free choice feeding. In addition, canned food can lead to increased plaque and tartar buildup on the teeth.

Table foods are not recommended. Because they are generally very tasty, cats will often begin to hold out for these and not eat 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. We enjoy a variety of things to eat in our diet. However, most cats actually prefer not to change from one food to another unless they are trained to do so by the way you feed them. Do not feel guilty if your cat is happy to just eat one food day after day, week after week.

Commercials for cat food can be very misleading. If you watch carefully you will notice that commercials promote cat food on taste alone. Nutrition is rarely mentioned. Most of the "gourmet" foods are marketed to appeal to owners who want the best for their cats; however, they do not offer the cat any nutritional advantage over a good quality dry food, and they are far more expensive. If you read the label of many of the gourmet foods, you will notice that they do not claim to be "complete and balanced". If your cat eats a gourmet food very long, it will probably not be happy with other foods, and may develop nutritional deficiencies. If it needs a special diet due to a health problem later in life, it is very unlikely to accept it. Therefore, we do not encourage feeding gourmet cat foods.

How should I feed my kitten?

Whichever type of food you chose, it is important to control the amount of food available. The amount to feed will depend on your kitten's activity level and the amount of calories in the diet you are feeding. You can start by following the feeding guide suggested by the pet food manufacturer. Keep in mind that many of these feeding guides will overestimate the amount to be fed, especially in spayed and neutered pets, and will need to be adjusted to your pets needs.

Most cat owner prefer "free choice" feeding. This means that food is available at all times. While it is perfectly acceptable to let cats eat throughout the day, it is important to provide a fixed, measured amount each day and not simply fill the bowl whenever it is empty. This is because almost all cats will overeat when provided with an unlimited amount of food.

Another options for feeding is called "meal feeding." This means that the kitten is fed at specific times of the day. A measured amount of food should be offered, and what is not eaten within thirty minutes is taken up. Kittens 8-16 weeks of age should be fed 3-4 times a day; those over four months should be fed at least twice a day.

What are ear mites?

Ear mites are tiny insect-like parasites that live in the ear canal of cats and dogs. The most common sign of ear mite infestation 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. The instrument we use for examining the ear canals, an otoscope, has the necessary magnification to allow us to see the mites. Sometimes, we can find the

mites by taking a small amount of the black material from the ear canal and examining it with a microscope. Although ear mites may leave the ear canals for short periods of time, they spend the vast majority of their lives within the protection of the ear canal. Transmission generally requires direct ear-to-ear contact. Ear mites are common in litters of kittens if their mother has ear mites.

How do I insure that my kitten is well socialized?

The prime socialization period for cats occurs between two and twelve 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 cat to as many types of social situations and influences as possible.

Can I trim my kitten's sharp toenails?

Kittens have very sharp toenails. They can be trimmed with your regular fingernail clippers or with nail trimmers made for dogs and cats. If you take too much off the nail, you will get into the quick, which will be painful and may cause bleeding. If this happens, neither you nor your cat will want to do this again.

Therefore, a few points are helpful:

- If you look closely at your cat's nails, you will be able to see the quick, or nail bed, which is a pinkish area at the base of the nail. As long as you stay at least 1/32" (1 mm) in front of the quick, you will be okay.
- Use sharp trimmers when cutting your cat's nails. Dull trimmers tend to crush the nail and cause pain even if you are not in the quick.
- 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.

My kitten is already becoming destructive. What can be done?

For all cats, scratching or "sharpening claws" is normal behavior. It keeps the claws in shape by helping to shed outer layers of dead nail. It also serves as scent marking behavior. There are a number of things you can do to minimize damage to your furniture and carpets.

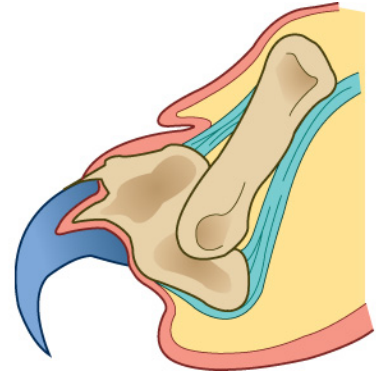
Many cats can be trained to use a scratching post and spare the furniture. Scratching posts come in different styles and textures; try experimenting with different types to see which your kitten prefers. You can also try placing a scratching post next to the furniture and sprinkling a bit of catnip on it to attract your kitten. Praise your cat when it uses the post, and try the remote punishment techniques discussed above when he scratches the furniture. You can also try using furniture corner protectors (available through some pet supply companies) or covering problem areas with double sided sticky tape or aluminum foil.

Clipping the nails can limit how destructive they are. The nails may be clipped according to the instructions above. Your cat's nails will regrow, and they can become sharp again within a few days to a few weeks. Therefore, to protect your property, it will be necessary to clip them regularly (from twice a week to every two weeks, depending on the pet).

There are some commercially available products that are called nail caps. These are generally made of smooth plastic and attach to the end of the nail with special glue. The nails are still present, but the caps prevent them from causing destruction. After two to four weeks the nails will grow enough that the caps will be shed. At that time you should be prepared to replace them.

Should I have my cat declawed?

Surgical declawing is the removal of the nail at its base. At Caring Hands Animal Hospital of Merrifield, we perform only laser declaws. The laser reduces bleeding, pain, and swelling after surgery. The procedure is done under general anesthesia and all patients receive strong pain medication before and after the surgery. Contrary to the belief of some, this surgery does not cause lameness or psychological damage. Actually, a declawed cat will not realize the claws are gone and will continue to "sharpen" the claws as normal without inflicting damage to your furniture. This surgery can be done as early as twelve weeks of age or anytime thereafter. It is usually done the same time as spaying or neutering. Once declawed, your cat should always live indoors since the ability to defend itself is compromised.



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