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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 *Chlamydia* 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.

