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KITTENS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEW 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 also carries with it quite a bit of responsibility. We hope this document 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. Either one of the technicians or one of the doctors will be happy to help you.

How should I introduce my new kitten to its new environment?

A cat is naturally inclined to investigate its new surroundings. It is suggested that the cat's area of exploration be limited initially so that these natural tendencies do not create an unmanageable task. 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 perceives that special favoritism is being shown the kitten. The existing cat must not feel that it is necessary to compete for food or for attention. The new kitten should have its own food and 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 occur occasionally, 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 playing should I expect from a kitten?

Stimulating play is important during the first week. 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 wads of paper, small balls, and string or ribbon. Kittens should always be supervised when playing with string or ribbons to avoid swallowing them. Any other 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 threatens people or property, but harsh punishment should be avoided. Hand clapping and using shaker cans or horns can be intimidating enough to inhibit undesirable behavior. 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) it, and making loud noises. Remote punishment is preferred because the kitten associates 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 very effective vaccines. In order to be effective, these vaccines must be given as a series of injections. Ideally, they are given at about 6-8, 12, and 16 weeks of age, but this schedule may vary somewhat depending on several factors.

The routine vaccination schedule will protect your kitten from five diseases: distemper, three respiratory organisms, and rabies. The first four are included in a combination vaccine that is given at 6-8, 12, and 16 weeks old. Rabies vaccine is given at 12 weeks of age. Leukemia vaccine is appropriate for any cat but a necessity if your cat does or will go outside or if you have another cat that goes in and out. This deadly disease is transmitted by contact with other cats, especially when fighting occurs. A vaccine is also available for protection against feline infectious peritonitis (FIP), an uncommon disease that is most likely to occur in groups of cats.

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

When the kitten nurses its mother, it receives a temporary form of immunity through its mother's milk. This immunity is in the form of proteins called antibodies. For about 24-48 hours after birth, the kitten's intestine allows absorption of these antibodies directly into the blood stream. This immunity is of benefit during the first few weeks of the kitten's life, but, at some point, this immunity fails and the kitten must be able to make its own long-lasting immunity. Vaccinations are used for this purpose. As long as the mother's antibodies are present, vaccinations do not "take." The mother's antibodies will neutralize the vaccine so the vaccine does not get a chance to stimulate the kitten's immune system.

Many factors determine when the kitten will be able to respond to the vaccines. These include the level of immunity in the mother cat, how much of the antibody has been absorbed, and the

number of vaccines given the kitten. Since we do not know when an individual kitten will lose the 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 immunity which is so important.

Rabies vaccine is an exception to this, since one injection given at the proper time is enough to produce long-term 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. For example, the most important source of roundworm infection in kittens is the mother's milk. The microscopic examination of a stool sample will usually help us to determine the presence of intestinal parasites. We recommend this exam for all kittens, if we can get a stool sample. Please bring one at your earliest convenience. Even if we do not get a stool sample, we recommend the use of a broad spectrum deworming product that is safe and effective against almost all of the common worms of the cat. It is given now and repeated in about 3-4 weeks, because the deworming medication only kills the adult worms. Within 3-4 weeks the larval stages will have become adults and will need to be treated. Cats remain susceptible to reinfection with hookworms and roundworms. Periodic deworming throughout the cat's life may be recommended for cats that go outdoors.

Tapeworms are the most common intestinal parasite of cats. Kittens become infected with them 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, the flea may be swallowed. The flea is digested within the cat's intestine; the tapeworm hatches and then anchors itself to the intestinal lining. Therefore, exposure to fleas may result in a new infection; this can occur in as little as two weeks.

Cats infected with tapeworms will pass small segments of the worms in 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 golden 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, 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.

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

Diet is extremely important in the growing months of a cat's life, and there are two important criteria that should be met in selecting food for your kitten. We recommend a NAME-BRAND FOOD made by a national cat food company (not a generic or local brand), and a form of food MADE FOR KITTENS. This should be fed until your kitten is about 12 months of age. We recommend that you only buy food that has the AAFCO certification. Usually, you can find this information very easily on the label. AAFCO is an 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. Most of the commercial pet foods will have the AAFCO label. Generic brands often do not have it. In Canada, look for foods approved by the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA).

Feeding a dry, canned, or semi-moist form of cat food is acceptable. Each has advantages and disadvantages. Dry food is definitely the most inexpensive. It 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. The good brands of dry food are just as nutritious as the other forms. As a rule, most veterinarians will recommend dry food for your kitten.

Semi-moist and canned foods are also acceptable. However, both are considerably more expensive than dry food. They often are more appealing to the cat's taste; however, they are not more nutritious. If you feed a very tasty food, you are running the risk of creating a cat with a finicky appetite. In addition, the semi-moist foods are high in sugar.

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 one basis: TASTE. 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 your cat eats a gourmet food very long, it will probably not be happy with other foods. 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 do I insure that my kitten is well socialized?

The Socialization Period for cats is between 2 and 12 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 events and influences as possible.

What can be done about fleas on my kitten?

Fleas do not stay on your kitten all of their time. Occasionally, they will 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. Many of the flea control products that are safe on adult cats are not safe for kittens less than four months of age. Be sure that any flea product you use is labeled safe for kittens.

If you use a flea spray, your kitten should be sprayed lightly. Flea and tick dip is not recommended for kittens unless they are at least four months of age. Remember, not all insecticides that can be used on dogs are safe for cats and kittens.

There is a trick to spraying a kitten that will make the outcome safer and more successful. When a kitten is sprayed, the fleas tend to run away from the insecticide. If you spray the body first, many fleas will run to the head where they are very difficult to kill. The best method is to spray a cotton ball then use that to wipe the flea spray onto the kitten's face, from the nose to the level of the ears. That will keep you from getting it in the eyes and will cause the fleas to run toward the body. Wait about two minutes, then spray the body. Leave the spray on for about three minutes,

then wipe off the excess. This will permit you to kill the most fleas while putting the least amount of insecticide on the kitten.

There are three products that are given only once per month; both can be used in kittens as young as six weeks. Program™ is a tablet that causes the adult fleas to lay sterile eggs. It is very effective, but it does not kill adult fleas which usually live 2-3 months. Advantage™ and Frontline Top Spot™ are monthly products that kill adult fleas. They are liquids that are applied to the skin at the base of the neck. They, too, are very effective.

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; bleeding and pain will occur. If this happens, neither you nor your cat will want to do this again. Therefore, a few points are helpful:

- a. If your cat has clear or white nails, you can see the pink of the quick through the nail. Avoid the pink area, and you should be out of the quick.
- b. If your cat has black nails, you will not be able to see the quick so only cut 1/32" (1 mm) of the nail at a time until the cat begins to get sensitive. The sensitivity will usually occur before you are into the blood vessel. With black nails, it is likely that you will get too close on at least one nail.
- c. If your cat has some clear and some black nails, use the average clear nail as a guide for cutting the black ones.
- d. When cutting nails, use sharp trimmers. Dull trimmers tend to crush the nail and cause pain even if you are not in the quick.
- e. 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.

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 infection 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 they 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.

Why should I have my female cat spayed?

Spaying offers several advantages. The female's heat periods result in about 2-3 weeks of obnoxious behavior. This can be quite annoying if your cat is kept indoors. Male cats are attracted from blocks away and, in fact, seem to come out of the woodwork. They seem to go over, around, and through many doors. Your cat will have a heat period about every 2-3 weeks until she is bred.

Spaying is the removal of the uterus and the ovaries. Therefore, heat periods no longer occur. In many cases, despite your best efforts, the female will become pregnant; spaying prevents unplanned litters of kittens.

It has been proven that as the female dog gets older, there is a significant incidence of breast cancer and uterine infections if she has not been spayed. Spaying before she has any heat periods will virtually eliminate the chances of either. There is mounting evidence to believe that this is also true of cats. If you do not plan to breed your cat, we strongly recommend that she be spayed before her first heat period. This can be done anytime after she is five months old.

Why should I have my male cat neutered?

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 tom cat'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 one fight after another. Fighting results in severe infections and abscesses and often engenders rage in your neighbors. We strongly urge you to have your cat neutered at about six to nine 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.

If I choose to breed my cat, when should that be done?

If you plan to breed your cat, she should have at least one or two heat periods first. This will allow her to physically mature allowing her to be a better mother without such a physical drain on her. We do not recommend breeding after 5 years of age unless she has been bred prior to that. Having her first litter after five years of age is more physically draining to her and increases the chances of her having problems during the pregnancy and/or delivery. Once your cat has had her last litter, she should be spayed to prevent the female problems older cats have.

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

There are four options that you should consider: frequent nail clipping, nail shields, surgical declawing, and tendonectomy.

The nails may be clipped according to the instructions above. However, your cat's nails will regrow and become sharp again in about 4-7 days. Therefore, to protect your property, it will be necessary to clip them one to two times per week.

There are some commercially available products that are called nail caps. The most common one is called Soft Paws™. These are generally made of smooth plastic and attach to the end of the nail with a special glue. The nails are still present, but the caps prevent them from causing destruction. After 2-4 weeks the nails will grow enough that the caps will be shed. At that time, you should be prepared to replace them.

Surgical declawing is the removal of the nail at its base. This is done under general anesthesia; there is very little post-surgical discomfort, especially when it is performed on a kitten. 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 12 weeks of age or anytime thereafter. It can also be done the same time as spaying or neutering. Once declawed, your cat should always live indoors since the ability to defend itself is compromised.

Tendonectomy is the surgical removal of a small part of the tendon on the bottom of each toe. This tendon is needed to make the nail extend. The cat retains its nails, but it cannot extend them for sharpening and scratching. The only disadvantage of this procedure is that the nails continue to grow and may grow into the pads. Therefore, the nails should be clipped every 7 to 14 days.

Can you recommend something for pet identification?

The latest in pet retrieval is microchipping. This tiny device is implanted with a needle so the process is much like getting an injection. Our scanner can detect these chips; humane societies and animal shelters across the country also have scanners. A national registry permits the return of microchipped pets throughout the United States and Canada. We recommend it.