

What First Time Kitten Owners Should Know

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Kittens are supreme experts at getting people to fall in love with them in one glance, so be prepared for that if you go “to just look” at kittens. They are the master manipulators of cute. You may have less choice in the matter than you think, and you may be overwhelmed with the choices.

The prime time for kittens to be born depends on your geographic location, but in the United States it ranges from April through October.

Kittens make better pets if they stay with their mother until 8 to 10 weeks of age, the time frame during which their normal physical and social development matures. Sometimes people will find kittens that are orphaned or in miserable shape and take them home. They will likely make good pets, but single bottle-fed babies may not have great social skills.

The Big Surprise

Kittens can have kittens.

That's what most cat owners don't understand. Cats and kittens are far more like the rabbit's reputation for reproduction than the dog's. Technically, felines can have up to five litters a year, starting really, really soon after they leave their mother.

Female kittens begin their cycles when they are 80% of their adult size, which could be as young as 4 months of age but is generally more like 6 months. Many cat owners don't understand this situation, so it's best you know this before you bring home an intact female kitten.

Fun facts:

- Cats can get pregnant during their first heat.
- A cat can go into heat as often as every 2-3 weeks all year.
- Unlike dogs and women, there is no bleeding to indicate she's ready.
- Unless she's spayed, she will continue to go into heat her entire life. Cats don't experience menopause.
- Usually you can tell if she's in heat by her behavior. She will vocalize more loudly than usual (look up *caterwaul* in the dictionary) while calling to potential mates; lift her rear end up in the air; be more affectionate than usual; roll around the floor; and try to escape the house to go find a mate. The symptoms can last anywhere from a few days to two incredibly long weeks.
- She can get pregnant again within a few weeks after she gives birth. Nursing does not prevent conception.

Photo courtesy of Depositphotos



- The feline reproductive system is seasonal and cats are designed to give birth when it's warm, spring through early fall.

If you would like to avoid all of this, talk to your veterinarian about when the best time is to spay your individual kitten.

Indoor or Outdoor Kitty?

Photo by Karen James of VIN

One decision you need to make right off the bat is whether or not you are going to allow your cat outside or if the cat will remain inside at all times. Indoor-only cats are much safer because they don't get hit by cars, have fights with other animals, or become prey, but that means they remain away from their natural environment. Indoor cats need enrichment efforts to be happy, and sometimes weight control efforts, because cats were not designed to lounge around on the couch all day eating food they didn't hunt. Outdoor cats still need some enrichment inside, though. Outdoor cats can cause harm to the environment by possibly spreading intestinal parasites and diseases that cats and people can get from the cat's feces. If your cat is on a good parasite preventative, the risk is less. Also, outdoor cats can kill songbirds, affecting their population. Understand that your neighbors may not be happy about a cat defecating in their yard or bothering their indoor cats. Your choice should be made balancing potential dangers outdoors against possible boredom, stress issues, and weight gain indoors.



You can take indoor cats outside for walks on feline-specific harnesses and leashes. You could also create an outdoor cat enclosure called a catio, which can attach to your home so they can go in and out at will. If you decide to keep your kitten/cat indoors only, never let them out by themselves; if you allow “once in a while” forays into the great outdoors, do not assume they will remain in your yard.

Equipment you will Need Day One

If your kitten is a planned acquisition and you have time to get ready – as opposed to finding some poor scraggly thing late at night in the rain – there are a few basics you should have at home by the day you bring home your kitten.

The only things you absolutely must have immediately for a kitten are food, food and water containers, and a litter box filled with litter. Initially, you can use any bowl for water and food, but eventually you may wish to try food toys and puzzles for enrichment. Stainless steel or ceramic bowls are good.

Food specifically made for kittens is necessary (puppy and dog food does not have enough protein or taurine for felines to live on, although it's better than letting a stray go hungry

overnight) and you definitely need litter boxes and litter as soon as you possibly can. In a pinch, a cardboard box filled with sand is good temporarily.

If you know what your kitten was eating before arriving at your house, use that same food. If you'd like to change to something else, mix the two foods together, gradually increasing the percentage of the new food over a few days or a week. If you have no clue what the kitten was eating, then any completely balanced kitten food will do (ask your veterinarian for a recommendation; see more on food below). Cats are obligate carnivores, meaning they must have a meat-based diet. They break down protein to meet their blood sugar requirements, not the carbohydrates that people use. The overall effect of your cat's nutrition can usually be seen in your cat's health; spending more on well-balanced food usually translates to fewer veterinary bills.

Litter Box and Litter

You will be amazed at how quickly a kitten takes to using a litter box. It will make more difference in how well your kitten adapts to your household than anything else you provide. Note that these are two items, not one: a box and litter, both of which come in numerous types. Many cats prefer much larger litter boxes than what are sold in pet supply stores, something like a concrete mixing tub found at hardware stores, but for a kitten you can start out with a standard sized box. For one feline, have two boxes in different locations. Some like the boxes to be on different floors, or at opposite ends of the house. Most dislike having them adjacent to the washing machine and dryer, and they really don't want it near their food bowls. Each box should be scooped clean once or twice every single day, and the litter in it should be replaced every one to two weeks. When you are replacing the litter, wash the empty box with a fragrance-free detergent and make sure it's dry before new litter is put in it.

While it can be tempting to delay scooping or cleaning the box, don't. Just don't. Even though they are kittens, they are fastidious and prefer clean toilets (don't you?). Dirty boxes contribute to behavioral problems in which cats decide to pee and poop outside the box. Sometimes they get in the habit of going outside the box in a way that is appropriately called [inappropriate elimination](#). You want, with all your heart, to prevent your kitten from becoming one of those cats. Inappropriate elimination is one of the main reasons cats are surrendered to the shelter because it is difficult to live with the odor and cleanup of cat urine – which is nasty – and cat poop on your floors and carpeting. The best approach is to prevent it from happening.

Your first decision about litter is clumping or non-clumping. Clumping litter means the urine ends up formed into a sort of ball that is easily scoopable. Non-clumping litter tends to be clay, which some people prefer because of the way it absorbs odors. There is scented (to cover up the smell for your nose), unscented (because some cats don't like the fragrance), lightweight (more uses per bag), dust free (if either you or the feline have respiratory issues), natural (biodegradable and renewable sources such as corn, wood, pine, wheat, cedar, recycled paper products, etc.) and flushable (check your local ordinances first, as some cities do not allow flushing of pet feces).

Most cats have litter preferences, although some will use any material no matter the texture is or what it smells like. The best way to find out what your cat likes is to offer choices of litter and see which one is used. Try a few different types to make this experiment as accurate as possible and give each option enough time for the kitten to decide.

Behavior: What is Acceptable, What isn't

Remember that what is cute from a kitten is not likely to be cute with an adult cat. However, it's easy to train kittens, and training can be the same type of bonding experience it is with dogs. You can train a kitten to use the litter box, to come, to kill the toy, to jump on command, and so on. Use treats to teach them to come by shaking a can of something tasty, so when you need to find the little Houdini they come to you.

Unfortunately, you can also train the kitten to play-bite with your hand or jump on your moving feet under the covers. It may be adorable when they are 3 months old, but it's guaranteed not to be so cute in short order. Whatever you want to prevent in your adult cat should not be taught to your kitten or you may be experiencing it daily for well over 15 years.

Food

You can unintentionally train your kitten to not eat anything other than the one food they grew up with, which is usually kibble. Adult cats really aren't that picky, it's just that kittens imprint on what you give them so they seem finicky. They need to be introduced to different foods when they are kittens. If they ever become sick, their salvation may rest in their ability to eat something different, such as therapeutic canned food or kibble that has a different taste and texture. They need to try different types of canned foods, different kinds of meat, dry food, and dehydrated food. They can have one good quality food that is their normal fare, but who knows when you might run out of food or evacuate from a natural disaster and you want to give something like chicken or fish. If they have urinary problems because they don't take in enough water, they will need to eat canned food. Cats can be so stubborn on this subject that they will starve themselves rather than eat canned food.

Now is a good time to decide if you will regularly feed canned, dry, or a mixture. Cats have taste and texture preferences, and you should see what they like best. It's best to have some water in their diet, so giving at least some canned food every day is a good idea. Change up flavors and textures regularly even in canned – pate vs. shredded - and your adult cat will be much easier to work with should they get sick.

Vaccinations

Babies of every species are born with immature immune systems. Usually, nature provides protection with antibodies found in the colostrum, the milk the mother produces for the first few days after giving birth, but not all cats have good maternal antibodies and not all kittens get colostrum. While maternal immunity is in the kitten's system, any vaccines given will be inactivated. Vaccines will not be able to "take" until maternal antibodies have sufficiently dropped.



Vaccinations typically start or take place from 4-6 weeks, and then every 2 weeks based on lifestyle, to about 4 months. The reason for revaccinating is due to the window of susceptibility - when maternal antibodies wane – which can be at varied times in kittens, not because a vaccine works better after the prior one. By 14-20 weeks of age, maternal antibodies are gone and the kitten must be able to continue on their own immune system. Kittens receive a series of vaccines ending at a time when we know the baby's own immune system should be able to respond to those vaccines.

Photo by Dr. Teri Ann Oursler

A kitten's vaccination schedule is staggered because vaccinations produce a much greater response if they follow a vaccine given 2-4 weeks prior. Some of those vaccines are good for life, some are not.

What vaccinations your kitten needs, and when, is often determined by your geographical location. Veterinarians follow the recommendations of the [American Association of Feline Practitioners](#).

Preventive Measures

Puppies and kittens should be dewormed with pyrantel pamoate, fenbendazole, or milbemycin at 2,4,6, and 8 weeks of age, then monthly until whatever age your veterinarian recommends. Recommendations for ascarid (a type of worm) control in kittens older than 6 months of age vary. The Companion Animal Parasite Council recommends using parasite control products effective against ascarids monthly.

Enrichment

Environmental enrichment is necessary, especially for indoor cats. Think of it as a boredom buster. Environmental enrichment during kittenhood prevents behavior problems during adulthood. You cannot overdo it. Kittens that are only 3 weeks old like to play with crinkle balls or bells that make noises (although hopefully, you are not starting out with a 3-week-old kitten). Maybe they didn't have those toys where they were born, so start building their enrichment with those items. By 5 weeks of age, they can use scratching boards, run through tunnels, jump into cardboard boxes, squeak dog toys, and so on. It can be as simple as shredded paper or crunchy packing paper that you toss on the floor. As long as you don't frighten the kittens, it's okay.

The love of cardboard boxes is a life-long passion with cats: “If I fit, I sit.” Kittens like to climb, so carpeted cat trees are fantastic toys, especially when adjacent to a window to the street; a kitten rearranging your desktop is less so.

Kitten-Proofing

Kittens have no sense of mortality or danger whatsoever and must be protected from themselves. At around 8-10 weeks some can be fearful and they tend not to get into too much trouble, but around 10 weeks, kittens start to practice the art of pure love. They get cuddles, they get kisses, they get bold and courageous so they jump off things, dash underfoot, chew cords, jump on the hot stove, and play attack the dog. This period will last for a few months.

Help them help themselves by keeping a safe home for them. They will not understand why you need to kitten-proof the house. Because baby kittens are quite able to get to the top of tall dressers or kitchen cabinets, your baby-proofing has to be 3-D, not just the first few inches up from the floor. You may understandably presume for a moment that your 8-week-old kitten has just levitated.

When your kitty is still tiny, double check the washer, dryer and dishwasher before you start them because kitties will nap inside. If you have any furniture that reclines, check before you put the footrest down because kitties will find a way to nap in there.

Keep certain “toys” – as they will be viewed by the kitten – out of reach, such as string, yarn, milk-jug bands, hair bands, and the ilk as they may otherwise have to be removed surgically.

Start out by giving the wee one a small space, perhaps a bathroom or laundry room, shut off by doors or gates (remember to first check if the kitten is small enough get through the gate slats, because they occasionally seem to go boneless). They should feel safe and comfortable in the small space before they get more space. As they grow, gradually expand their space and gain familiarity with the house. That way they don't lose track of where the litter box is. Houses can be very, very big to small kittens. They are also adept at finding the tiniest, most tucked away sleeping spots (think of the recliner) so a smaller search area will likely save you some moments of panic searching.

Don't let them have free run of the household without supervision. If they get into trouble, they are back to a room with a closed door.

Scratching

Scratching is a natural behavior of cats. They do it for a couple of reasons, one of which is to mark their territory. They have scent glands on their paws. Scratching removes old nails and allows growth of new ones. Since their nails are their primary method of protection as well as their hunting weapons, they have an instinct to preserve them. They'll scratch on anything, including your furniture and curtains, so direct them to scratch on appropriate materials, specifically scratching posts. If you get a cat tree, get one with a scratching post, and put a couple of scratching posts around the house.

Hunting

Cats are natural predators. Hunting is hard wired in them, and there is no way to eliminate it. It has nothing to do with how well fed they are; they will still hunt if they are not hungry, they just won't consume their prey. Feral cat mothers bring home dead or injured prey to teach their kittens how to eat. Many people get barn cats specifically for rodent control. You can indulge their instinct indoors with certain toys, but there is nothing like live prey. Indoor cats will hunt rodents that come inside.

Cat Carriers

Unless your kitten arrived as a stray or in a cardboard box, you may already have a [cat carrier](#), but if you don't you will need one. Your cat will have to go to the veterinarian sometimes, or you may move, your house may catch on fire, or you may need to be evacuated from a natural disaster. There are many types of carriers: some open in the front, or on top, or both, some come apart, and so on. You can [train your cat](#) to accept it. It's much safer for your kitten in there than being held in your arms where they can jump out. You can leave it out all the time, and sometimes toss treats or toys in, so when it is time to go your kitten does not feel that they are being shoved into some random alien space station.

Also, get your kitten [microchipped](#) and don't forget to register the chip unless your clinic does it for you. Lost cats are returned to owners at much lower rates than dogs in part because of a lack of identifying information (i.e., microchip, collar with tags).

Making an effort to provide your kitten with the tools for a good adult life will pay off wonderfully for the rest of the cat's life. From the day you bring them home until the end of their life, your life will be enhanced by your relationship with this hilariously funny, tender species. May your lives together be filled with joy!