



## Health Care for Kittens and Cats

As a responsible pet owner, it is important to be aware of the following health and wellbeing issues. Always practice good sanitary habits and wash your hands thoroughly after interaction with your pets.

**Intestinal Worms:** Treatment for intestinal worms is very important. Kittens that are not treated for worms can become very sick and sometimes die. Some intestinal worms can also be spread from cats to humans (particularly *hookworms*, *roundworms* and certain *tapeworms*).

Kittens require more regular deworming than adult cats:

- Kittens **2-12 weeks old** should be dewormed **every 2 - 3 weeks**.
- Kittens **3-6 months old** should be dewormed **once a month**.
- Kittens **6 - 12 months** should be dewormed at least **every three months**.
- After one year of age discuss with your veterinarian an appropriate deworming schedule.
- There are tablets given by mouth and topical products which can be used for deworming

**Fleas:** Fleas are a common cause of anemia (low red blood cells) because they feed on blood. Skin irritation and itchiness can be present. Fleas can transmit certain parasites to your cat such tapeworm. **Flea control** is recommended for all cats found to have them. Please note: **DOG PRODUCTS SHOULD NEVER BE USED ON CATS AS THEY CAN CAUSE TOXIC REACTIONS**. Lots of different products are available for flea control and they are often combined with an intestinal dewormer. Be careful if you use flea collars or flea products that are available in the supermarket, as some of these products are generally ineffective and often unsafe. Powder in particular can be ingested as the cat grooms. Flea shampoo can assist in removing a heavy burden of fleas but does not eliminate fleas nor have residual effect once the hair-coat is dry.



**Ticks:** Ticks are uncomfortable for your cat and can cause damage to their skin. Tick infestations are not commonly seen on healthy cats. Ticks feed on your pet's blood and heavy tick infestations can cause anemia (low red blood cells). They are also responsible for the spread of certain diseases. You should check your cat for ticks every day and gently remove any that you find by grasping near the skin and pulling steadily until they come off.

Do not attempt to remove ticks using boiling water, kerosene or fire. Some products are available that treat both ticks and fleas; and some products can last up to 6 months – these generally need veterinary approval.

Ticks live in your cat's environment. You should regularly treat their bedding and living area with an appropriate insecticide, as well as vacuum +/- or launder bedding and surfaces.



**Heartworm:** Heartworm is a disease that affects dogs and occasionally cats. The heartworm larvae are **spread by mosquitoes**. The larvae develop into adults and live inside the heart and associated vessels – in dogs untreated this eventually develops into heart failure. In cats we commonly see respiratory signs. You should take the time to discuss this with your veterinarian and decide if and what preventive product to use.

**Vaccination:** It is important to protect your kittens and cats against three most common serious viral diseases of cats - Feline Viral *Rhinotracheitis*, *Feline Calicivirus* and *Feline Panleukopenia*

For your kitten and cat to be fully protected against these diseases they will require:

Vaccination	Age
1 <sup>st</sup>	8-10 weeks of age
2 <sup>nd</sup>	12 - 16 weeks of age
Annual booster vaccination one year after second booster	Every 12 months until 3 years of age then frequency after discussion with the veterinarian

Your kitten should be kept away from unvaccinated cats and kittens who are not siblings and areas where unvaccinated cats could have been until two weeks after their final vaccination. Additional vaccines are sometimes considered and include Feline Leukemia Virus – these should be discussed with your veterinarian.

## **Neutering (also called castration in males, spay in females or desexing):**

- It is strongly recommended that you neuter your cats.
- This minimises the risk of certain unwanted behaviours such as roaming, aggression, fights and other accidents.
- It prevents your cat from contributing to the population of unwanted stray animals.
- Spaying or neutering also helps prevent many life-threatening diseases such as abscesses, and infections.
- Kittens should have this surgery **between 5-6 months of age** but, it is never too late for any adult pet.
- Neutering involves having the cat undergo a routine surgery, under general anaesthetic.
- Most cats undergoing this surgery are released to go home with their families the same day.
- If you keep your cat for breeding be aware that responsible breeders never turn their animal out to breed unsupervised.
- The drive to mate is biologic to reproduce, not for sexual gratification.
- A female cat does not need to give birth or become a mother – in fact many have difficult pregnancies or birthing and sometimes die in the process.
- The only reason for pregnancy is to increase the cat population. As soon as all the unwanted kittens and cats are cared for then consider a breeding program.
- Until we have almost eliminated the stray and feral cat populations which humans are responsible for, there is little reason to not neuter your cat.
- Your neutered cat will be a better feline companion and get into far less trouble than an unneutered cat.
- There is a higher number of trauma (boiling water, dog attacks, motor vehicle accidents for examples) in cats which are not neutered.

## **Biology of reproduction in cats**

Cats have their first oestrous or heat (reproductive) cycle when they reach puberty. On average, puberty, or sexual maturity, first occurs in cats at about six months of age, but this can vary slightly by time of year.

Each cycle consists of several stages; the stage called oestrus refers to when the female is sexually receptive, or in heat.

Cats are seasonally polyoestrous, which means that they have multiple cycles during the breeding season. The breeding season will vary according to geographic and environmental factors such as temperature and the number of daylight hours. Cats that live in more tropical regions or mainly indoors may cycle all year round.

Each heat generally lasts several days with the average length being six days. If the queen (an unspayed female cat) is not mated during oestrus, she will go out of heat for a short period of time. Therefore, the complete oestrous cycle of a cat can range from anywhere between one to six weeks, with the average cycle length being about three weeks.

It is not common to observe vaginal bleeding from a cat in heat as we do in dogs. The most notable signs of oestrus in cats are behavioural. Most cats become very affectionate, even demanding; they persistently rub against their owners (or objects such as furniture), constantly wanting attention. They roll on the floor. When stroked along the back or spine, they raise their rear quarters into the air and tread with the back legs. They also become very vocal. These behaviour changes often become annoying to owners, and sometimes owners think their cat has some unusual illness.

Some female cats will urinate more frequently or may even spray urine on vertical objects (marking) when they are in heat. The urine contains both pheromones and hormones, both of which act as signals of her reproductive status to other cats. This is the reason that queens in heat attract intact (unneutered) male cats. In some cases, this may be the first indication that a young cat has reached puberty.

Tomcats (unneutered male cats) that have never been seen before in your yard or neighbourhood will appear. They may spray urine on the house to mark the territory (and female) as theirs or may even attempt to enter the house to mate with the female.

The queen can be bred at any time when in heat. Cats are induced ovulators, which means that the act of breeding stimulates the release of eggs from the ovaries. Most females require three to four matings within a 24-hour period for ovulation to occur. It only takes a minute or two for cats to mate, and cats may mate multiple times in a short period of time. Queens may mate with several different tomcats during this time, so it is possible that a litter of kittens may have several different fathers. Once ovulation has occurred, the queen will go out of heat within a day or two.

Pregnancy in the cat lasts approximately 64 to 71 days with an average of nine weeks (63 days).

The best way to prevent your cat from becoming pregnant is to have her surgically sterilized (an ovariohysterectomy or spay operation) before she has her first estrous cycle. Since it can be difficult to predict when this first cycle will occur, most veterinarians recommend performing an ovariohysterectomy when a cat reaches six months of age.

There are no valid reasons for letting a cat have an estrous cycle or have a litter of kittens before being spayed. Cats can become pregnant on their very first estrous cycle, increasing the chance that an accidental breeding may occur. Cats are indiscriminate, so a brother cat may breed with its sister, a father may breed with his daughter, and a son may breed with his mother.

A common myth is that female cats will become more friendly and sociable if they are allowed to have a litter of kittens. This is not true, and only serves to contribute further to the serious problem of cat overpopulation.



### **Normal growth and development from kittenhood**

- Pregnancy is approximately 2 months
- Kittens are born with eyes and ears closed. These should open by 2 weeks of age. Use warm water on cotton balls to gently encourage mucous seal to open if needed but not before eyes are opening normally within the litter.
- If kittens are orphaned or need to be fed milk then Rewa or other brands cow milk is OK. Liquid is preferred because mixing the powder to the correct consistency is difficult. For the first week or two a warm moist cotton ball gently stimulating under the tail will encourage proper urine and poop to pass.
- By 3 weeks they will be standing and learning how to walk but not with grace until they are about 6 weeks old.
- Between 3 and 5 weeks they should be transitioned to solid food while still nursing so that full weaning, finding a new home can occur with minimal diet difficulty by 6-8 weeks. By this time, the mother will appreciate not having nursing kittens who have teeth.

**Diet:** Good nutrition is very important for healthy growth and development. You can buy commercial cat food that is meant to be specially designed to meet the nutritional needs of your growing kitten and adult cats. You should feed kittens food for growth until they reach 8 – 12 months of age after which cats can then go onto adult food. In Fiji it is common to feed home-cooked food and most cats do very well on this diet - this consists of a mixture of majority cooked meat or fish, with a small percentage of carbohydrates (rice, potato, bread) and vegetables. Cats have diet requirements more like carnivores (meat eaters) than dogs do.

Kittens require more regular feeding than cats and should be fed:

- **3 – 4 small meals a day** between 6 and 12 weeks of age
- **2 - 3 meals a day** when 12 weeks to 6 months of age
- **Daily food split into 2 meals a day** when older than 6 months

**Do not feed:**

- cooked bones – especially fish bones, long chicken bones or small pork bones as these can splinter and cause damaged digestive tract or blockages
- Do not feed rotten or spoiled food – they can get tummy aches and food poisoning just like us.
- Do not feed chocolate, coffee, onions, garlic, grapes, yeast dough, raisins, nuts or alcohol as some can cause illness and others death
- Avoid feeding raw eggs on a daily basis as this can result in a biotin deficiency. Cooked eggs however provide a great source of protein, fats and other nutrients

**Housing and environment:** Cats should have shelter from the weather available to them at all times. This includes shade from the sun and warm bedding if it is cold. Your cat's sleeping area should be elevated off the ground to prevent moisture accumulation from the ground, or rain leaking in. They should have clean fresh water available at all times. Neutering your cat will be the single most important thing you can do to keep your cat safely at home.



**There are many ideas for a safe outdoor environment which allows your cat exercise.**

**Socialisation:** Cats need time and space to get comfortable with their surroundings, and people. Play is important to help establish a good bond and trust. Take the time with your cat to help groom and check out what can be very hidden body parts – this keeps you aware of your cats' health.

**Grooming:** Grooming (brushing and combing) your cat will help prevent hairballs and a matted coat. Most cats do an excellent job grooming themselves – if their coat is starting to look rough that is an indication something is wrong.

**Medications and Products used on your cat:** If you purchase products to use on or in your cat make sure to read the package. Many drugs and chemicals which are safe for dogs are not safe for cats. Do not give human medicines without consulting a veterinarian – furthermore use extreme caution when obtaining advice on such use from internet sites.

**First Aid:** SPCA has a website with a work in progress to provide first aid instruction for some of the more common situations we come across here in Fiji so please stay tuned to this site

**Transporting your cat:** Get or make a secure carrier to transport your cat. Small and cozy will make them feel safe and comfortable. Your cat is comfortable in your arms at home, but will more than likely run away or scratch and bite you if something frightens it (loud noise, strangers, barking dog, children screaming, loud bus or truck and many more). Furthermore, it is extremely unsafe to travel with a loose pet in your car. A scenario which has caused many accidents is a cat trying to find a safe spot and gets right under your brake pedal. Secure your cat safely for travel.



Helpful Websites include:

<https://www.sPCA.nz/advice-and-welfare/article/bringing-your-new-cat-home>

SPCA Fiji Islands <https://www.spcfiji.com/>

Feline Health Center <https://www.vet.cornell.edu/departments-centers-and-institutes/cornell-feline-health-center/health-information>

<https://catvets.com/guidelines/client-brochures>

CAPC – Companion Animal Parasite Council <https://capcvet.org/guidelines>

TroCCAP - Tropical Council for Companion Animal parasites <https://www.troccap.com/>

<http://csu-cvmb.colostate.edu/vth/small-animal/community-practice/Pages/owner-care.aspx>