

Care of pregnant cats

cats.org.uk



This guide gives general advice about how to care for pregnant cats, what to expect when they give birth and the care of newborn kittens. This guidance is not a replacement for specific advice from your vet.



The importance of neutering

At Cats Protection we believe that neutering is the best way to create a healthy, balanced cat population, preventing accidental pregnancies and ensuring all cats have somewhere to live that fits their individual needs.

Cats can become sexually active at four months old, so it's important to neuter your cat as close to four months old as possible to prevent unwanted pregnancies. It's also important to remember that cats aren't selective and will mate with any other cat if the opportunity presents itself, including relatives. If you let your female cat outside before she is neutered, she will very likely get pregnant.

If your cat gets pregnant by accident, neutering is still possible. Your vet will be able to advise you on what will be best for your cat.

If you want your cat to have kittens, ask your vet for advice first. They can help you understand if your cat is healthy enough for a pregnancy and advise you on how to take care of her health, including what to feed her and how to protect her from illness, worms and fleas.

Please note: There are no health or welfare benefits in allowing a cat to have a litter of kittens before she is neutered. Both pregnancy and giving birth involve risks for the mother. Caring for pregnant cats can also involve increased costs and be time-consuming.

Reproduction

Female cats can get pregnant as early as four months old. If they are not neutered, they can become fertile every few weeks from February to September. During this time, they may become restless, meow loudly and become more affectionate. These periods can last up to 14 days. During this time they will produce a scent that attracts male cats from far away who will try very hard to reach them.

Female cats will allow any male cat, even relatives, to mate with her. If you let an unneutered female cat outside, or they live with an unneutered male cat, there's a high chance they will become pregnant. This will also put both her and her kittens at risk of picking up an infectious disease from roaming male cats.

It is not uncommon for cats to mate with several males while they are fertile.

When this happens there may be multiple fathers responsible for the litter. When you see a litter of kittens with lots of colour variation, that can be the reason.

Pregnancy and care of a pregnant cat

Pregnancy lasts approximately 63 to 65 days, around nine weeks.

- After about four weeks, your cat will gain weight, and her nipples will darken and enlarge. She might vomit and eat less too, but she should seem otherwise well. A vet can confirm her pregnancy with an ultrasound or by gently feeling her tummy. You should be careful if picking her up from now onwards, and only do so if she likes this, to prevent accidentally hurting her or her kittens
- At six weeks, she will be very hungry. Make sure her food is suitable for pregnant cats and allow her to eat as much of it as she likes. Kitten food is often a good food for pregnant cats. Keep feeding her extra food until her kittens are weaned. Make sure she has lots of fresh, clean water too
- Around week seven, she will want to start nesting, looking for a safe place to give birth. Set up a warm, quiet area with clean blankets away from family and other pets

- In the last couple of weeks, she will clean herself more and may have some clear or red-tinged discharge from her vagina, which is normal. She might seem worried and want more attention, showing she is close to giving birth. If she goes to her nesting spot, the kittens might come soon

Birth and kitting

The best way to help your cat during this time is to watch her quietly from a distance to avoid disturbing or stressing her. The birthing process, or kitting, has three stages, with the second and third stages repeating for each kitten.

If you have any concerns during your cat's labour, contact your vet right away.

First stage: lasts up to 36 hours, shorter for cats who have had kittens before.

- There are contractions of the uterus, but these won't be visible to you yet and there is no straining
- The cat is restless and visits her bed often

Second stage: lasts five to 30 minutes for each kitten.

- Contractions get stronger and become visible
- The cat starts straining, and the kitten comes out
- The mother breaks the foetal membrane (water bag), chews the umbilical cord, and licks the kitten to clean them and help them breathe

Third stage: passing the placenta or afterbirth.

- This usually happens right after the kitten is born, but sometimes two kittens are born before the placenta
- Count the placentas to make sure one comes out for each kitten, as not birthing a placenta can lead to a serious infection. If not enough placentas come out, call your vet

Kittens are usually born 10 to 60 minutes apart, although the mother may take a break during the birth where she will rest, eat and drink, and feed the kittens she has birthed. She will then go on to have the rest of the litter. This pause may be up to 24 hours long, but the mother should seem well in herself, behaving normally and relaxed, stay near her kittens and not show any straining.

Cats can have up to nine kittens in a litter but usually there are four to six. First-time mothers usually have a small litter size.

When the birth is finished the mother will settle and allow the kittens to feed.

If everything goes well, leave her alone, but ensure she has access to food and water and a litter tray. Keep water bowls safely out of kittens' reach to prevent them from falling in and drowning.

What can go wrong with the birth?

In most cases cats will manage without any help. However, difficult births can occur. Prior to your cat giving birth, make sure you have your vet's phone number to hand, plus the contact details of the vet practice that covers outside of normal working hours. This won't always be the same clinic, so it is worth being prepared in case you need advice.

You should call the vet for advice during the birth:

- if contractions last longer than 24 hours without any sign of straining
- if the cat has been straining for more than 30 minutes without producing anything
- if the first kitten has arrived and no further kittens appear after an hour
- if the cat suddenly seems weak
- if there is excessive discharge without a kitten
- if a kitten is stuck half-way out and cannot be delivered

If in doubt, always call your vet. However, there are some things you can do to help. Remember to wash your hands before touching the kittens.

- If you have to help at all, call your vet right away, as the kittens might be at risk of infection or being rejected by the mother

- If the mother doesn't clean the kitten, use clean, soft kitchen roll to clear the foetal membrane from their head. Wipe their nose and open their mouth to clear it. Rub the kitten in small circles to help them breathe
- Normally, if left undisturbed, the mother will bite through the umbilical cord. If this doesn't happen, it can be torn gently (to replicate the mother chewing through it). Leave an inch or more attached to the kitten, and tear using both hands, holding the cord between your thumb and two fingers on either side. Ensure not to pull on the cord at all.
- If the mother avoids the kittens, keep them warm by placing a warm, well-covered hot water bottle near them. Make sure the water is no hotter than body temperature (36°C to 38°C/98°F to 100°F). The water should just feel comfortably warm on your wrist

Care of newborn kittens

Warmth is very important as newborn kittens lose heat very quickly. If the mother is attentive, she will clean them and use her own body heat to keep the kittens warm. If she is very tired, unwell or is disturbed, she may ignore them. If this happens you will need to provide a warm bedded area and can use a safe heat pad or a covered hot water bottle to keep them warm. This should be no hotter than body temperature.

Keep the room temperature warm and the bedding clean and dry.

If the mother is calm and settled, quickly and quietly check and weigh each kitten. They should each weigh between 90 to 110g. They should be weighed daily to ensure they're gaining 10 to 15g per day. By the time they are two weeks old they should weigh double their birth weight.

The mother should also be carefully monitored following the birth. Take care not to disturb her and don't interfere with the kittens if everything is going well. However, speak to your vet if she seems unwell or appears unsettled as she may harm her kittens.

Feeding

Kittens should start nursing from their mother right away. If they don't start to suckle after 30 minutes of being born, gently guide them to the mother cat's nipples. If they still don't feed, contact your vet immediately as newborn kittens need milk within two hours of being born. You may need to hand feed them if they are not able to suckle from their mother.

It is important to encourage the kittens to feed from their mother as soon as possible because the milk she produces in the first 24 hours after giving birth is rich in antibodies. These antibodies keep

the kittens safe from disease during the first weeks of their life. This first milk is called colostrum and kittens can only absorb colostrum in the first 16 to 24 hours of their life.

After this period, the mother's milk continues to provide essential nutrients for the kittens, but it will not contain many antibodies.

Kittens need to feed every two to three hours. Well-fed kittens will sleep between feeds. If they are not getting enough milk they may become distressed, restless and cry excessively. Distressed kittens may also leave the mother or stop feeding. If this happens, consult your vet for advice on extra care and feeding.

Hypoglycaemia (low blood sugar)

Low blood sugar in kittens occurs when they don't eat enough or often enough or take in enough milk. This can make them very weak, cause muscle twitching, and sometimes lead to seizures. If a kitten refuses to eat, talk to your vet immediately. Kittens have no energy reserves and can deteriorate quickly.

Weaning: the transition from milk to solid food

Weaning should start when the kittens are around four weeks old and takes several weeks.

Kittens normally learn by copying their mother, so she should lead them to her food once they are ready to be weaned. By feeding the mother kitten food, you will meet her increased need for energy, and ensure the kittens have access to an appropriate food for them to eat.

Alternatively, and for kittens who are being hand-reared, you may want to offer diluted commercial kitten milk in a shallow bowl, following the product's instructions. Gradually encourage the kitten to lap from the bowl. Over time, add wet kitten food to the milk, increasing the wet food until the kitten eats solid food. This process should take three to four weeks, with the kittens continuing to suckle.

When the kittens are fully weaned, gradually separate them from the mother to help her milk dry up. Don't fully separate them until the kittens are at least eight weeks old, as they are still learning from her. Taking them away from their mum too soon can cause distress to the kitten and mum and lead to behavioural issues like obsessive kneading or sucking on objects like toys and blankets.

Supplementary feeding and hand-rearing

If the mother dies, rejects the kittens or is too ill to look after them, the kittens will need to be hand-reared.

If a mother cat is only temporarily ill, kittens may only need to be hand fed for a few days, while in other situations kittens may need to be fed by hand until they are weaned.

If a litter is too large for the mum to manage properly, as long as the kittens are drinking some milk from their mother, they may only need to be given a little extra commercial kitten milk by hand.

It is not recommended to give orphaned kittens to another cat to rear. Another cat may not accept the kittens, she may neglect or attack them, and there is the risk of spreading infectious diseases, some of which may be fatal.

Hand-rearing is hard work and not to be undertaken lightly.

Hand-reared kittens need:

- caring for throughout the day and night
- a strict hygiene routine to prevent disease
- a consistent feeding regime. Newborn kittens must be fed every two to two-and-a-half hours
- to be fed with great care. It is easy for kittens to inhale the milk and develop pneumonia which can be fatal. Overfeeding can be as dangerous as underfeeding

- to be helped to pee and poo before and after each feed until at least three weeks old
- to be adequately socialised with positive experiences and given the opportunity to be taught normal behaviour that they would normally learn from their mother

If possible, it is important that they remain with their mother and littermates because orphaned kittens may be at risk of developing behavioural issues.

If you need to hand-rear, speak to your vet about how to do this.

Veterinary care

Talk to your vet about the best flea and worm treatments for the mother cat and her kittens. Ask them when to start the kittens' vaccinations, because the immunity they get from their mother's milk begins to decrease around eight to nine weeks.

Neutering

You can neuter the mother cat while she's still with the kittens. It's best to wait until the kittens are about eight weeks old and not dependent on her. However, she can get pregnant again one to two weeks after giving birth, so if she goes outdoors, neuter her as soon as possible. Neutering will not affect the mother's milk supply.

Kittens should be neutered around four months old. If not, separate males from females and the mother to prevent inbreeding. For more information see cats.org.uk/neutering

Normal kitten development

- Newborn kittens weigh approximately 90 to 110g depending on breed and number of kittens in the litter
- Kittens should gain around 50 to 100g per week (10 to 15g per day) and should double their birth weight by two weeks of age
- The umbilical cord should dry out quickly after the birth and remain dry until it naturally falls off around three days after birth
- Eyes are closed at birth and open at around 10 days old. Their eyes are a blue-grey colour until changing colour permanently at around four to six weeks old
- Crawling starts at seven to 14 days old
- Walking starts at around two weeks old
- Kittens cannot pee or poo by themselves until they are around three weeks old
- Weaning starts at around three to four weeks old

- The sensitive period of a kitten's learning is two to seven weeks of age, also known as the 'socialisation period'
- Kittens can start to spend short periods of time away from their mother from six to seven weeks of age
- Kittens should not be fully separated from their mother until at least eight weeks of age
- Vaccination can usually start at eight to nine weeks of age. Worm and flea treatment is often recommended before this
- Sexual maturity is reached from four months of age
- Kittens lose their 26 baby teeth and have their 30 adult teeth by six months of age
- Social maturity occurs between 18 months and four years of age, when relationships between cats may change

Behavioural development

Kittens go through the crucial development phase the 'socialisation period' between two and seven weeks of age. During this time, they learn what is normal and safe. Exposing them to various positive experiences, like different sights, sounds, textures and smells, helps them adapt better in the future.

Kittens not exposed to different experiences during this sensitive period are more likely to be afraid of new things later in life. For example, feral kittens born in the wild without exposure to people during the socialisation period cannot be tamed and will remain very scared of people throughout their lives, making them unsuitable as pets.

To ensure kittens become good pets, it's important for them to have positive experiences with various aspects of the domestic environment they will encounter in the future, such as:

- the noise of household appliances like washing machines and vacuum cleaners
- cat carriers to prepare for vet visits
- meeting a variety of people, from babies to adults
- being gently touched and handled

Ensuring that these experiences are gentle and positive will help the kittens' development.

Taking advantage of socialisation opportunities during this sensitive period will help kittens become well-adjusted, content and sociable pets for the rest of their lives. Kittens can learn a great deal from their mother, so it's recommended they stay with her until they are at least eight weeks old.

For more information see

[**cats.org.uk/kitten-socialisation**](https://cats.org.uk/kitten-socialisation)

Rehoming

There are so many unwanted cats and kittens in the UK that it may be difficult for you to find good homes for your kittens. Take your time to find homes where the kittens will be well cared for. Kittens may be homed singly or in pairs. If listing cats or kittens online, please take care to ensure buyers visit in person.

The most important thing is to find them homes with owners who will provide for them both physically and mentally and have them neutered. To keep them happy, cats and kittens need homes where they are allowed to display their natural behaviours. As well as food, beds and litter trays, cats also need toys, scratching posts, places to hide and be alone, and somewhere to get up high.

If homed in pairs, ensure the new owners will provide enough separate beds, bowls and toileting areas for the kittens in case they choose to live more separate lives when they are older.

You can find more about selling cats and kittens online, relevant legislation and advertising standards, which good websites should adhere to at paag.org.uk/selling-a-pet

For more information see cats.org.uk/kittens

The following vet-approved guides are available to download from cats.org.uk/information-leaflets

Essential guides

Behaviour: Understanding your cat's behaviour W84009

Behaviour: Managing your cat's behaviour W84010

Bringing your cat home W84002

Caring for your cat W84001

Caring for your kitten W84015

Cats and people W84014

Cats living together W84011

Elderly cats W84016

End-of-life, grief and loss W84007

Feeding and obesity W84004

Feral cats W84017

Indoor and outdoor cats W84012

Keeping your cat safe W84005

Microchipping W84008

Moving home W84003

Neutering W84006

Pregnant cats, birth and care of young kittens W84018

Veterinary guides

Arthritis W83201

Cat flu W83216

Digestive disorders: vomiting and diarrhoea W83218

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukaemia virus (FeLV) W83209

Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD) W83202

Fleas and other parasites W83215

Heart murmurs and heart disease W83211

Hyperthyroidism W83212

Infectious disease and vaccination W83217

Kidney or renal disease W83206

Skin disorders W83204

Teeth and oral health W83214

Please see cats.org.uk for more information on:

Cats and pregnant women: toxoplasmosis

Cats and the law

Cats with disabilities

Diabetes

Feline asthma

Feline coronavirus (FCoV) and feline infectious peritonitis (FIP)

Feline parvovirus (FPV)

Hypertension

You and your vet

For more information about Cats Protection or to find out how you can support us, go to **cats.org.uk**



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