

Your Kitten

A BSAVA booklet in aid of Petsavers



Petsavers



BSAVA
BRITISH SMALL ANIMAL
VETERINARY ASSOCIATION

Owning a kitten brings its own special rewards and responsibilities. Your local veterinary practice is your best ally in keeping your kitten or cat healthy. The team of vets and nurses have plenty of knowledge and experience and will be happy to offer you advice.

Settling in

For the first few days keep your kitten in one room with her carrier (to retreat into), her bed, food bowls, litter tray and toys.

Cats thrive on routine so feed her at the same time and in the same place each day.

Gradually introduce her to other rooms, after 'kitten proofing' them. Always supervise her when she is exploring, and if she is in danger of getting into mischief distract her by calling her or offering a toy.

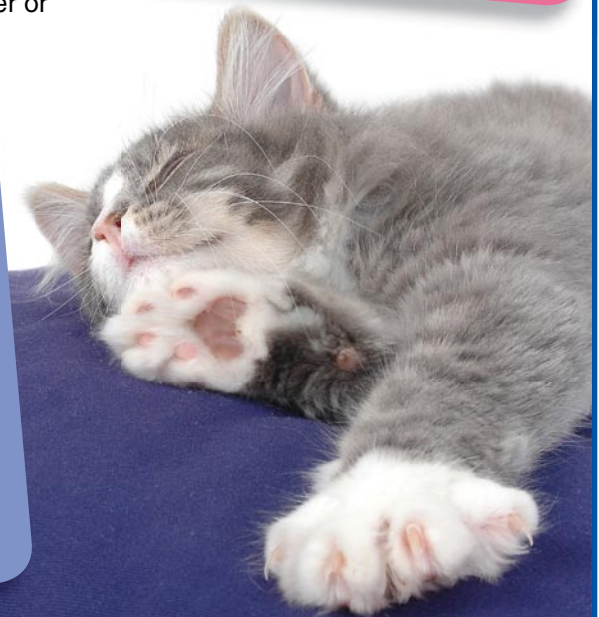
Your kitten needs:

- A sturdy carrier
- Kitten food
- Food and water bowls
- A litter tray and litter
- A few simple toys (they can be home-made)
- A cat comb and soft brush
- A scratching post

Bedtime

Kittens need a quiet resting place, to retreat to and to sleep. You can buy cat beds, but a small cardboard box and an old towel, or piece of blanket, are cosy alternatives. But don't be disappointed if your kitten has her own ideas about where to sleep.

Kittens are very active and need plenty of rest. Don't wake her up to play – she'll let you know when she is ready for action.



Socialisation

A young kitten is a fast and eager learner, particularly in the first weeks and months of life. This is the time when you should try to expose her to a wide variety of new experiences – new sights, sounds, smells and people. This will help ensure that she grows up feeling confident and secure.

Before you introduce your kitten to everyday sights and sounds around the house, like the radio, television, washing machine and vacuum cleaner, make sure that she has a bolt hole to escape to if she gets frightened.

Introduce your kitten to all kinds of different people – for example, children, men, women, people with glasses and with beards. Let the kitten approach the new person in her own time as her confidence grows. Also let her meet other pets, but again make the introductions slowly, and never force the issue. Don't leave your kitten alone with another pet unless you are certain that the fur won't fly the moment your back is turned.



Basic training

Your kitten needs to learn the house rules – for example that climbing the curtains, sharpening claws on the sofa, stealing food, and frightening the budgie, are not allowed. If she gets into mischief, a sharp 'No' or a clap of the hands should be enough to distract her. Never smack a kitten - she won't understand.

Once you have made a rule, be consistent. Ensure that all of the family follow the same rules, to avoid confusing your kitten.



Feeding your kitten

Growing kittens have specific nutritional requirements, and the simplest way to fulfil them is to buy a good quality complete diet from a reputable manufacturer.

For the first few days after your kitten comes home, continue to feed the food she's used to, to help prevent tummy upsets. Then you can gradually introduce a new food. Moist or dry? It's up to you. However dried foods are more convenient to feed and help to keep your cat's teeth free from a build up of tartar which can quickly lead to dental decay.

Meat is a must

Never feed your kitten or cat on dog food or a vegetarian diet. Cats need more protein than dogs, and also taurine, which is found only in meat. Cats that do not get enough taurine run the risk of developing serious eye and heart problems. Remember that a good quality complete dry diet does contain plenty of meat, as well as everything else that your kitten needs to stay healthy.

Treat time

Only give your kitten healthy cat treats, and keep edible treats to a minimum – instead reward your kitten with praise and cuddles.

Water

Always have a bowl of fresh water next to your kitten's food bowl. This is particularly important if you are feeding a dry diet.

Don't give your kitten cow's milk or cream, as they contain lactose (a kind of sugar) which cats cannot digest properly, and can cause diarrhoea. If you want to treat her to a saucer of milk, you can buy special 'cat milk'.



Scratching for fun

Cats scratch to mark their territory and to shed loose claw coverings. If you give your kitten a scratching post it should help to divert her away from the furniture.



Litter training

By the time you bring your kitten home she will almost certainly be litter-trained. The most you will probably need to do is stand her in the litter tray and gently stroke the litter with her paw, and she will do the rest.

Remember to keep her litter tray in the same location, in a quiet place well away from her water and food bowls.

Start with the kind of litter your kitten is used to. You can swap to a different kind later by gradually mixing in more of the new litter at each change. Cats are very fastidious, so keep the litter tray clean and if 'accidents' do happen, don't scold the kitten, as she won't understand what she's done wrong.



Exercise and play

Play is the key to kitten learning – and also provides exercise. When kittens are with their mother and siblings, boisterous play develops their physical and mental abilities, strengthens their muscles and increases their social skills.

Now that the kitten lives with you, make time to play so that she can continue to develop her 'cat skills' – like stalking and pouncing.

Toys should be small and light enough to bat and carry around in her mouth – but not small enough to be swallowed. Pieces of rolled up paper or a table tennis ball are ideal and a large cardboard box, with several holes cut in the sides, makes a great place for kitten hide and seek. Check toys regularly and discard any that become damaged.

Safe toys

Don't buy toys with: • sharp or rough edges • small parts that could break off and be swallowed. Toys on strings should be kept for 'supervised' playtime.

Grooming

Start grooming your kitten when she is young and she'll love the attention. Grooming removes dead hairs and stimulates the circulation. It also gives you an opportunity to check for fleas and to see that your kitten's eyes and ears are clean and her claws are not overgrown.

Short-haired kittens only need grooming once or twice a week, but long-haired breeds need at least 15 minutes every day.

Until your kitten is used to being groomed, keep sessions short, and stand her on a folded towel, to help her feel secure while you brush her.

You'll need:

- A soft bristle brush
- A fine-toothed cat comb (for shorthairs)
- A wide-toothed cat comb (for longhairs)
- A rubber brush (optional)

Hairballs

When cats groom themselves they swallow loose hairs which can form hairballs in their stomach or intestines. These are uncomfortable and have to be coughed up or passed in the litter tray. Regular grooming removes loose hair and helps prevent hairballs forming.



Claws

Outdoor cats generally keep their nails from becoming overgrown by scratching on trees and fence posts, but indoor cats' claws may become overgrown and need clipping. Your vet or vet nurse will do it for you, or show you how.

Fleas and other external parasites

Any kitten or cat can pick up fleas, but your vet can advise you on safe and effective products to treat your pet and your home (to kill eggs and larvae in her bedding, the carpets and soft furnishings).

Fleas make your kitten uncomfortable, can spread disease and cause allergies. Severe infestations can cause anaemia, particularly in very young kittens.

If untreated, parasites can lead to skin infections, so if you spot them, or if your pet is itching or has a rash, ask your vet.

Finding fleas

Comb your kitten over a piece of white paper. Dab any dark specks falling onto the paper dab with a piece of dampened kitchen paper towel. If they turn reddish brown, they are flea droppings, which contain dried blood.

Many people choose to apply regular anti-flea treatment to their cats (e.g. once a month), to prevent fleas rather than waiting until there is an unpleasant flea problem to fix in their home.

Other external parasites

- **Lice** – pale brown and resemble fleas but are much smaller. They cause itching and irritation.
- **Mites** – can cause intense irritation and itching but are often invisible to the naked eye. Examination of a sample with a microscope may be needed for diagnosis.
- **Mange mites** burrow into the skin.
- **Cheyletiellamites** ('walking dandruff') don't burrow into the skin.
- **Ear mites** – cause irritation deep inside the ear. Dark brown wax can produce an unpleasant smell if the ear becomes infected.
- **Harvest mites** – small orange mites which tend to attach themselves in the folds of the ear or between the toes. Seen in late Summer. Cause some irritation.
- **Ticks** – round, and can swell to the size of a pea. Usually picked up by outdoor cats. Never try to remove a tick without being shown how to do this first – ask your vet for advice.



Internal parasites (worms)

Kittens and cats can pick up worms, particularly if they catch and eat prey. Your kitten may have worms when you get her but your vet can provide treatment. Even if you don't see any evidence of worms you should discuss a preventive worming programme with your vet as soon as you get your kitten. Some worms can be passed to humans, especially young children.

The main types of worms are:

Roundworms – look like tiny strands of fine spaghetti. They can be passed to the kitten in her mother's milk, so kittens should be wormed from three weeks old.

Tapeworms – made up of rice grain-like segments forming chains up to 50cm long. One kind of tapeworm can be picked up if fleas are swallowed and another if cats eat prey.

Lungworms – can be picked up from small prey such as slugs, snails, mice or frogs. Some cats are symptomless; others may have a dry cough.

What to look out for:

- Vomiting or diarrhoea (which may contain worms)
- Tapeworm segments around the cat's bottom
- Swollen tummy
- Weight loss
- Coughing (in the case of lungworms)



Remember that your cat can have worms even if you cannot see any sign of them in her faeces. Regular preventive treatment is essential. Your local veterinary practice will be able to advise you on the safest worming programme to follow

Dental care

A kitten's baby teeth come through when she's about three to four weeks old and her adult teeth start to erupt at around four months.

Being a carnivore without a good set of teeth isn't much fun, so you need to pay attention to your cat's teeth throughout her life. Cats are particularly prone to dental decay, often occurring where the tooth meets the gum, so start inspecting her teeth regularly so that you will see when it's time for a trip to the vet. Look for teeth that are dark, loose or chipped and check that the gums are not bleeding, puffy or discoloured. If your cat has difficulty eating she may have a tooth or gum problem, so make an appointment with the vet, who can check whether she needs a 'scale and polish', or any other treatment.

Tooth cleaning

If your kitten will co-operate, it's worth starting a tooth cleaning regime at home to dislodge food particles and help prevent a build up of tartar on the teeth. Tartar can lead to dental decay and gum disease.

Always use a specially formulated cat toothpaste, which often comes with a small toothbrush you slip over your finger. Never use human toothpastes as these are designed to foam, and cats can't 'rinse and spit'. Try to clean your kitten's teeth several times a week to help keep plaque to a minimum.

Vaccinations

There are vaccinations that will protect your kitten from a number of serious and highly infectious diseases. Vaccinations prime the cat's immune system so that if she comes into contact with the disease later, her body is better able to 'fight back'.

Don't allow your kitten to roam where other cats (who may not have been vaccinated) may have been until she has completed her first vaccination programme.

All kittens and cats should be vaccinated against:

- Feline Influenza (cat flu)
- Feline Infectious Enteritis (FIE/panleucopenia)
- Feline Leukaemia Virus
- A vaccine against *Chlamydia* is also sometimes recommended.

These vaccinations are generally given at approximately nine weeks with a follow-up dose three weeks later. Thereafter booster vaccinations are usually recommended every year, to keep protection up to date. Having your cat vaccinated each year also means that your vet can give your cat a thorough health check to spot any possible problems early.

Dried cat foods help to keep your cat's teeth clean. There are special dried foods available that are particularly good at cleaning tartar off the teeth. Ask your vet which diet would most suit your kitten.

Neutering

Unless you plan to breed from your cat, and can find good homes for all the kittens, then neutering is the responsible thing to do.

The male operation (castration) is very straightforward and usually doesn't require stitches. The female operation (spaying or hysterectomy) is a more complicated procedure, when the ovaries and womb are removed through a small incision in the cat's side or belly. She'll need stitches and will take longer to recover. She may need to wear an 'Elizabethan collar' if she starts picking or nibbling at her stitches.

Both operations are carried out under a general anaesthetic. Kittens and cats are generally neutered at any time from around five to six months onwards, although some veterinary practices may operate early neutering programmes.

Advantages of neutering

- Prevents unwanted litters
- Reduces territorial behaviour, such as urine marking
- Reduces the strong odour of urine in unneutered cats
- Reduces roaming in search of mates
- Reduces fighting between tom cats, and therefore the risk of FeLV and FIV, serious viruses which can be spread by scratching and biting
- Prevents womb infection in female cats
- Prevents testicular cancer in male cats
- Prevents the drain on the female cat's body caused by repeatedly coming into 'heat' and pregnancy



Microchips

If your kitten or cat goes outside – and even indoor cats can escape – she should have some form of identification. If your kitten can be identified she is much more likely to be returned to you if she gets lost.

A microchip is a reliable and permanent form of ID. A tiny electronic device – the size of a grain of rice – it is injected under the loose skin at the back of the neck. The unique numbered chip is entered into a central computer database with your name, address and contact telephone number. If your pet is found, its chip can be read with a hand-held scanner, and checked against the database.

Ask your veterinary practice for details of microchipping – it is a very simple and inexpensive procedure. Remember if you move house you will need to inform the microchipping database.

You can also use a collar and engraved metal identity disk, or barrel containing a piece of paper with your name and address, so your kitten can be identified. Be sure to buy a collar with a 'quick release' catch so that your cat can escape if she becomes snagged or caught.

Routine teeth cleaning, vaccinations, flea and worm control, and neutering, are not covered by insurance, so you will need to budget for these.

Pet insurance

Taking out pet insurance will give you peace of mind so that you won't need to worry about vet's bills if your cat is ill or injured.

Ask your vet for advice, and shop around, as policies vary greatly. Generally, if you pay higher premiums you get a higher level of cover.

Watch out for exclusions. If your cat already suffers from a condition when you take out insurance you may find that this condition (and related conditions) will not be covered.

If your cat develops a long-term health condition, e.g. kidney problems, you will find that some insurance companies will pay for the first year, but in the future you may not be able to claim for that condition, while other companies will continue paying (up to a maximum amount each year).

Discounts

Some insurance companies offer discounts if:

- You insure two or more pets for them
- You pay an annual rather than monthly premiums
- You agree to pay a proportion of each vet's bill
- Your kitten is non pedigree
- You live in certain postcode areas

Presented to you by:

Petsavers is dedicated to improving the health of the nation's pets.

We do this by funding clinical studies and clinical training programmes.

- Petsavers clinical studies give us a better understanding of pets' illnesses. This leads to improved diagnosis and treatment so that pets can have longer and healthier lives.
- Petsavers training programmes develop the skills of vets so that they can apply the results of the clinical studies and their expertise to pets as soon as possible. These vets are referred to as Petsavers Scholars.

No experimental animals are used in Petsavers studies.

In the last 30 years Petsavers has given over £1.7 million towards these goals. Over this time the need for this funding has become even greater as other sources have dried up. We rely on the support of vets, nurses and pet owners.

By helping Petsavers, you can make sure that our knowledge of small animal medicine and surgery is improved. Find out how by going to our 'How you help' page which you will find on our website: www.petsavers.org.uk



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