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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.

Preparing your home for your new kitten.

Before you bring your new kitten home, think carefully about possible hazards in your kitten's environment. These include, but are not limited to, electrical cords, candles, fireplaces, cigarettes, irons, dryers, trash cans, sharp utensils, cleaning products, poisonous plants etc. Your kitten can't judge what is safe and what is potentially harmful; therefore, your kitten needs your help.

It will also help to have certain basic supplies already waiting when your kitten comes home. All of these are readily available and relatively inexpensive.

Beds and Bedding

The most important thing you can do to make your kitten feel at home is to have a corner ready for just your kitten. Cat beds are available in many varieties, from elaborate cat beds sold at pet stores to a homemade wooden box. The size of your cat's bed should be in proportion to his/her adult size. Bear in mind though that most cats like to sleep curled up rather than stretched out. For your kitten's first bed, it is recommended that the bed have sides at least twelve inches high to help him/her feel more secure and to keep drafts out. Line the beds with a pillow or cushion covered in washable fabric and place the bed in a warm, quiet corner in your home. (Preferably one where the cat can be isolated and slowly introduced to the new home.)

Don't be disappointed if your kitten doesn't prefer your chosen sleeping space. It takes quite a bit of experimentation to arrive at sleeping quarters that is suitable for both you and your kitten.

Cat Carrier

A cat carrier is essential even if you plan to travel with your kitten no further than the veterinarian's office. Most pet stores offer a variety of pet carriers in a variety of sizes, shapes and materials. Look for one that is well ventilated, escape-proof and easy to clean. Avoid cages that have sharp exposed edges that could injure your kitten or protrusions that could snag on your kitten's collar and choke him/her. The most useful carriers are made of lightweight plastic or fiberglass.

Food and Water Bowls

You will need two heavy ceramic or stainless steel bowls; one for food and one for water. If you have more than one kitten, each should have a set of its own. Fresh water should be available at all times and the food and water bowls should be cleaned daily.

Litter Box

A litter box, cat litter and a scoop are essential. Even if your kitten has access to an outdoor area, your kitten should not be let out until he/she has adjusted to his/her new home. Your kitten's litter box should always be accessible and easy to find. Choose a box that is deep enough to keep your kitten from scattering litter when he/she digs. It's best to use about 2 inches of litter in the bottom of the box.

Commercial litter doesn't have to be changed every day; just use the scoop to remove the wet places and feces and replace them with fresh litter. You should however, wash the litter box 1-2 times per week with hot water. Be careful; some disinfectants, such as Lysol, can be toxic, and your kitten may be repelled by the scent. Most cats prefer commercial, unscented clay or sand litters. Although shredded newspaper may seem cost effective, it absorbs soil and odor less effectively and is harder to clean up.

Brushes, Combs, and Nail Clippers

Grooming should be a regular part of your cat's routine. Although cats are generally fastidious about their own grooming, a little attention from their owners is helpful from time to time.

Another important part of grooming your cat is to trim the nails. Use only nail trimmers specifically designed for cats, which are available at your local pet store.

Scratching posts

A scratching post will give your kitten a place to stretch and exercise, as well as to keep his/her claws in proper condition. It will also help prevent your cat from using your furniture to satisfy these needs. Most pet stores offer a variety of scratching posts, but you can easily construct one of your own by covering an appropriate piece of wood with carpet, tree bark or coiled rope. If you use carpet make sure it is not the deep-pile kind; the fluffy surface can't offer enough resistance for your cat's claws. You can mount the posts on the wall or have it free-standing by attaching it to a sturdy wooden base. Make sure the post cannot easily tip over.

It is important to offer a variety of scratching posts in different rooms of the house, especially those rooms where your cat spends most of his/her time. When introducing a new scratching post, show your cat where it is located and gently press his/her paw pads on the scratching post. The pads have scent glands; by pressing your cat's paws on the scratching post, you will be "marking" the scratching post with your cat's scent which will help attract your cat to the scratching post.

Leash, Collar and Id Tag

Unlike their canine counterparts, most cats do not like to walk on a leash. Some breeds, most notably Siamese, do enjoy walking with their owners on a leash.

A collar should have a breakaway section, so that the kitten can escape if the collar catches on some object. A collar should carry identification in the event your kitten gets lost. (Microchipping is the recommended identification method. This will be addressed in the following paragraphs.)

Toys

Provide your kitten with toys---a ball, a rubber mouse, or anything it can play with and not be injured. Your local pet stores have a wide selection of toys available. You can also find numerous things in your house that can entertain a young kitten, such as a cardboard box, or a pair of balled up socks.

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 less likely to occur 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 to occur 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 laser pen lights. Unless supervised, strings or ribbons are not recommended toys due to the potential for intestinal obstruction if the kitten swallows a string or ribbon. 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. Due to increases susceptibility of kittens under a year of age to the feline leukemia virus, the feline leukemia vaccine is recommended at 9 and 12 weeks of age for all kittens. This vaccination is then recommended as an annual vaccination for any adult cat that goes outdoors or is exposed to any cat that goes outdoors. This deadly disease is transmitted by contact with other cats, especially when fighting occurs.

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.

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.

Can I trim my kitten's sharp toenails?

Kittens have very sharp toenails. They can be trimmed with nail trimmers made for cats. If you take too much off of the nail, you will get into the quick; the quick is where the nerve and blood vessel are located, therefore, 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.

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.

Traveling with your kitten.

Acclimate your kitten to travel when your kitten is young, even if you do not expect to travel with your cat often in the future. Even the occasional trip to the veterinarian will be more pleasant if your kitten has been exposed to the routine of traveling with you.

Whether you use your car or public transportation, a cat carrier is an essential piece of equipment. Introduce it to your kitten at an early age and let her get accustomed to going in and out of it. Leaving the carrier out all of the time as part of your kitten's environment (rather than just taking it out for trips) will help her get accustomed to the carrier, and ultimately, make it easier for you to get her into the carrier. Start with a short trip and gradually increase the length of the journey. If your cat complains, talk to your cat in a soothing voice, but don't let him/her out of the carrier under any circumstances.

Avoid leaving your kitten in the car, even for short periods of time. In the summer, temperatures inside a parked car can rise to fatal extremes in only minutes. If you must leave your kitten in the car in hot weather, park in the shade and roll the windows down (assuming the cat is in the carrier). Merely cracking the windows won't provide adequate ventilation.

If you travel outside the United States, a rabies vaccine is essential; you will not be able to re-enter the U.S. without it. You should also make sure that your cat's other vaccinations are current. An official health certification should be dated no more than a week before you begin your trip. Many countries require the certificate to be translated into their language and notarized by the consulate.

The local office of the U.S. Department of Agriculture can help to guide you through the often-bewildering maze of international regulations.