

Breeding Cats and Raising Kittens

Breeding cats and raising kittens can be an extremely rewarding experience or it may produce frustration and failure. The following information is provided in order to increase your chances of success.

The Feline Estrus Period

The female cat (queen) comes into heat (estrus) many times each year. The heat period lasts about 2-3 weeks. If she is not bred, she will return to heat in 1-2 weeks. The period of time that she is out of heat will vary depending on geographic and environmental factors, such as temperature and the number of daylight hours.

Signs of Estrus

Cats have minimal vaginal bleeding, and changes in behavior represent the most notable sign. Cats become very affectionate. When stroked over the back, they raise their rear quarters into the air and tread with the back legs. They also become very vocal. These behavior changes often become obnoxious to owners and may be interpreted as some unusual illness. In addition, queens in heat attract intact (non-neutered) male cats. Tomcats that have never been seen will appear and attempt to enter the house to get to the female.

The Pregnant Queen

Pregnancy, also called "gestation," ranges from 60 to 67 days and averages 63 days. Most cats deliver (queen) between days 63 and 65. The only way to accurately determine the stage of pregnancy is to count days from the time of breeding. If possible, the breeding date should be recorded.

A pregnant cat should be fed a kitten formulation of a premium brand of cat food for the duration of the pregnancy and through the nursing period. Kitten diets provide all the extra nutrition needed for the mother and her litter. If the mother is eating one of these diets, no calcium, vitamin, or mineral supplements are needed.

During pregnancy, the mother's food consumption will often reach 1.5 times her level before pregnancy. By the end of the nursing period, it may exceed 2 times the pre-pregnancy amount. Do not withhold food; increasing the number of feedings per day is helpful in allowing her to eat enough for her needs and those of the kittens.

Preparation for Queening

From the time of breeding, many cats show behavioral changes. Most develop an unusually sweet and loving disposition and demand more affection and attention. However, some may become uncharacteristically irritable.

During the latter stages of pregnancy, the expectant mother begins to look for a secure place for delivery. At the onset of labor, many nervously seek a place to make the "nest" or birthing place. If the cat is attached to her owner, she may not want to be left alone at the time of delivery. If left alone, she may delay delivery until the owner returns.

Prior to the time of delivery, a queening box should be selected and placed in a secluded place, such as a closet or a dark corner. The box should be large enough for the cat to move around freely, but have low enough sides so that she can see out and so the owner can reach inside to

give assistance, if needed. The bottom of the box should be lined with several layers of newspapers. These provide a private hiding place for the expectant and delivering mother and will absorb the birthing fluids. The upper, soiled layers may be removed with minimal interruption to the mother and her newborn kittens.

Labor and Delivery

Most cats experience delivery without complications; however, first-time mothers should be attended by their owner until at least one or two kittens are born. If these are born quickly and without assistance, further attendance may not be necessary, although it is desirable. If the owner elects to leave, care should be taken such that the cat does not try to follow and leave the queening box.

The signs of impending labor generally include nervousness and panting. The cat will often quit eating during the last 24 hours before labor. She will also usually have a drop in rectal temperature below 100° F (37.8° C). The temperature drop may occur intermittently for several days prior to delivery, but it will usually be constant for the last 24 hours.

Delivery times will vary. Shorthaired cats and cats having slim heads, such as Siamese, may complete delivery in one to two hours. Domestic body type cats (having large, round heads) generally require longer delivery times. Persian and other domestic body type kittens tend to be very large and have sizable heads that make delivery more difficult. It is not unusual for Persians to rest an hour or more between each kitten. Rarely, a cat may deliver one or two kittens, then have labor stop for as long as twenty-four hours before the remainder of the litter is borne. However, if labor does not resume within a few hours after the delivery of the first kittens, examination by a veterinarian is advised. If labor is interrupted for twenty-four hours or more, veterinary assistance should definitely be obtained.

Kittens are usually borne head first; however, breech presentations, in which the kitten is delivered tail end first, occur about 40% of the time and are also considered normal. Each kitten is enclosed in a sac that is part of the placenta ("afterbirth"). The placentas usually pass after the kittens are born. However, any that do not pass will disintegrate and pass within 24-48 hours after delivery. It is normal for the mother to eat the placentas.

If the delivery proceeds normally, a few contractions will discharge the kitten; it should exit the birth canal within ten minutes of being visible. Following delivery, the mother should lick the newborn's face. She will then proceed to wash it and toss it about. Her tongue is used to tear the sac and expose the mouth and nose. This vigorous washing stimulates circulation, causing the kitten to cry and begin breathing; it also dries the newborn's haircoat. The mother will sever the umbilical cord by chewing it about 3/4 to 1 inch (1.9 to 2.5 cm) from the body. Next, she will eat the placenta.

If the kitten or a fluid-filled bubble is partially visible from the vagina, the owner should assist delivery. A dampened gauze or thin wash cloth can be used to break the bubble and grasp the head or feet. When a contraction occurs, firm traction should be applied in a downward (i.e., toward her rear feet) direction. If reasonable traction is applied without being able to remove the kitten, or if the queen cries intensely during this process, the kitten is probably lodged. A veterinarian's assistance should be sought without delay.

It is normal for the female to remove the placental sac and clean the kittens. If the sac is not removed within a few minutes after delivery, the kitten will suffocate, so the owner should be prepared to intervene. The kitten's face should be wiped with a damp wash cloth or gauze to remove the sac and allow breathing. Vigorous rubbing with a soft, warm towel will stimulate circulation and dry the hair. The umbilical cord should be tied with cord (i.e., sewing thread, dental floss) and cut with clean scissors. The cord should be tied snugly and cut about 1/2 inch (1.3 cm) from the body so it is unlikely to be pulled off as the kitten moves around the queening box.

Newborn kittens may aspirate fluid into the lungs, as evidenced by a loud raspy noise during respiration. This fluid can be removed by the following procedure. First, the kitten should be held in the palm of one's hand with the face cradled between the first two fingers. The head should be held firmly with this hand, and the body should be held firmly with the other. Next, a downward swing motion with the hands should make the kitten gasp. Gravity will help the fluid and mucus move out of the lungs. This process may be tried several times until the lungs sound clear. The tongue is a reliable indicator of successful respiration. If the kitten is getting adequate oxygen, it will appear pink to red. A bluish colored tongue indicates insufficient oxygen to the lungs, signaling that the swinging procedure should be repeated.

It may be helpful to have a smaller, clean, dry box lined with a warm towel for the newborn kittens. (A towel can be warmed in a microwave oven.) After the kitten is stable and the cord has been tied, it should be placed in the incubator box while the mother is completing delivery. Warmth is essential so a heating pad or hot water bottle may be placed in the box or a heat lamp may be placed nearby. If a heating pad is used, it should be placed on the low setting and covered with a towel to prevent overheating. A hot water bottle should also be covered with a towel. Remember, the newborn kittens may be unable to move away from the heat source. Likewise, caution should also be exercised when using a heat lamp.

Once the delivery is completed, the soiled newspapers should be removed from the whelping or queening box. The box should be lined with soft bedding prior to the kittens' return. The mother should accept the kittens readily and recline for nursing.

A veterinarian should examine the mother and her litter within 24 hours after the delivery is completed. This visit is to check the mother for complete delivery and to check the newborn kittens. The mother may receive an injection to contract the uterus and stimulate milk production.

The mother will have a bloody vaginal discharge for 3-7 days following delivery. If it continues for longer than a week, she should be examined by a veterinarian for possible problems.

Problems During Delivery

Although most cats deliver without need for assistance, problems do arise which require the attention of a veterinarian. Professional assistance should be sought if any of the following occur:

- 1) Twenty minutes of intense labor occurs without a kitten being delivered.

- 2) Ten minutes of intense labor occurs when a kitten or a fluid-filled bubble is visible in the birth canal.
- 3) The mother experiences acute (sudden) depression or marked lethargy.
- 4) The mother's body temperature exceeds 103° F (39.4° C) (via a rectal thermometer).
- 5) Fresh blood discharges from the vagina for more than 10 minutes.

Difficulty delivering (dystocia) may be managed with or without surgery. The condition of the mother, size of the litter, and size of the kittens are factors used in making that decision.

Milk Fever

Eclampsia or milk fever is a depletion of calcium from the mother due to heavy milk production. It generally occurs when the kittens are 3-5 weeks old (just before weaning) and most often to mothers with large litters. The mother has muscle spasms resulting in rigid legs, spastic movements, and heavy panting. This can be fatal in 30-60 minutes, so a veterinarian should be consulted immediately.