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Care of Mother Cat and Kittens

The pregnancy period for a cat is 58 to 71 days. The average time period is 63 days. The cat will require extra care during her pregnancy. She will need 3 to 4 times as much food during the last month of pregnancy and all during the time of nursing.

When labor starts, the cat should not be disturbed, except to check on her occasionally to see that the birth is going well. If the cat has strong contractions for more than two hours, and no kittens are born, contact your veterinarian immediately. Mother and kittens weaken rapidly; waiting to seek help lessens their chances of survival. You should not help the mother clean the babies or cut the cords. It is very rare for a mother cat not to handle the birth process herself. The queen may stop these normal functions if you interfere. Mother cats have been known to eat their young because of human meddling during labor.

After delivery, complications are rare in cats. If the mother cat does not eat after 24 hours or has a heavy smelly discharge from the vagina, she should be checked by your veterinarian. Occasionally the cat may have a dead kitten in the womb, or a retained placenta (afterbirth), or an infection in the uterus. These can be fatal conditions if left unchecked. The cat may occasionally develop a condition called eclampsia after giving birth. This condition occurs when the mother becomes depleted of calcium. The signs of eclampsia can be: restlessness, refusal to eat or to allow kittens to nurse, trembling, and eventually convulsions. Eclampsia can be fatal, but response to medical treatment is dramatic.

The female cat may come into heat again as soon as ten days after giving birth. If the queen is allowed to breed again at this time, she will have another litter before the first one is weaned. Cats should not be bred more than twice a year.

The female cat can be spayed at anytime, but the surgery is much easier on the cat if the milk is dried up before surgery. The old wives tale that a cat should have at least one litter before spaying is incorrect. The surgery is occasionally harder on a cat that has had a litter. If the cat is spayed at 5-6 months of age before the first heat, the procedure is considered simpler.

As long as the mother cat is around there is seldom need for you to do anything for the kittens. The mother cat will attend to their nursing and training. You should be watchful of the kittens. A sick kitten will stop nursing, not move about, and will go downhill very rapidly unless they receive prompt medical attention. Lack of mother's milk is a common cause of death in kittens. You should check the mother's breasts by gently squeezing them. The hungry kitten will cry a lot at first, their bellies may sink in. the kitten will lose weight rapidly, instead of making the approximate ½ ounce per day weight gain during the first week.

Another cause of sudden kitten illness is feline panleukopenia (cat distemper). This illness should not occur in the nursing kitten if the mother's vaccinations are up to date. Immunity to distemper will be passed through the milk to the kittens.

Respiratory infections, parasites, bacterial infections, exposure to cold, and congenital defects are all problems with serious consequence in kittens. Prompt veterinary care will save many kittens. Making sure the mother cat is healthy can avert most serious problems. The cat should have good prenatal care, a well balanced diet, a clean warm environment to raise the kittens in, and be up to date on all vaccinations. At three weeks the kittens may be started on solid foods, such as pablum, meat baby foods or canned cat foods. You may obtain a special kitten diet from your veterinarian. Start with one meal a day; slowly increase to two, then three and finally four over a period of three to four weeks.

The consistency of the food should be gradually increased. Start with very mushy food, smear the food on the kitten's lips, or put a small amount into the kitten's mouth. You should be very careful not to allow food to get into the kitten's nose, as it may cause suffocation. Kittens do not require milk other than the mother's milk. Milk may cause diarrhea. A queen's milk replacer such as "KMR" may be given. The careful weaning of the kittens will benefit the mother; it allows her to get back into good full health and strength under the best possible circumstances.

Kittens may be taken from the mother as early as six weeks. The best time to remove the kittens is when they are 8 to 10 weeks old. The mother will usually start pushing the kittens away at this age.

Kittens need to be vaccinated at 6 to 8 weeks of age.

If you have questions concerning your mother cat or kittens please contact your veterinarian.