

Feline reproduction

Female cats – queens – can become sexually mature from just four months of age. If queens are not neutered they have regular heat cycles showing restlessness, calling and wailing, squirming, rubbing and presenting the rear, in attempts to attract a mate. These periods of reproductive activity lasting a few days recur every few weeks during the breeding season – which usually runs from February until August. During these heat cycles, a queen will be very attractive to unneutered male tom cats which can detect her scent from several miles away and will make great efforts to reach her.

Pregnancy (Gestation) and care of the pregnant queen

Pregnancy lasts approximately 63-65 days – around nine weeks.

Heat cycles usually stop after mating once a cat becomes pregnant, although sometimes they will continue. If mating occurs again during the pregnancy this can lead to further foetuses being conceived and kittens born with different fathers in the same litter!

Pregnancy can be diagnosed by the vet using abdominal palpation from around three to four weeks of age or by using ultrasound. Pinkening up – enlargement and reddening of the teats – may be seen from around three to four weeks of pregnancy.

Between one and nine kittens will be born in a litter – most commonly four to six. First-time queens usually have a small litter size. When the birth is finished the mother will settle and allow the kittens to feed.

Normal kitten development

- Birth weight – approximately 90 to 110g – dependent on breed and number of kittens in the litter
- Growth rate – kittens should gain around 50 to 100g/week (10-15g/day) and should double their birth weight by two weeks of age
- Eyes are closed at birth and open at an average of 10 days old – though this varies from two to 16 days. The iris – or coloured part of the eye – stays a blue-grey colour until four to six weeks old before changing colour permanently
- Crawling starts at seven to 14 days old
- Walking starts at around two weeks old
- Kittens cannot pass urine and faeces without stimulation of the rear end by the queen until around three weeks of age
- Weaning starts at around three to four weeks old
- The sensitive period of a kitten's learning is two to eight weeks of age – the 'socialisation period'
- Kittens can start to spend short periods of time away from the queen from six to seven weeks of age
- Kittens should not be fully separated from the queen 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