

FELINE PREGNANCY AND DELIVERY

The normal gestation time for cats is 64-69 days, roughly two months. Around the time for delivery (*queening*), the female will seek out a secluded nest. It may be in a closet, under the shrubs, in the hayloft, or in the center of your bed. There will usually be little fuss or bother, but a few pregnant queens will stay close to the owner. Cats can delay the onset of labor or halt the delivery process if the nest is disturbed. Just prior to delivery, her body temperature will drop to under 100°F (37.8°C).

Kittens are usually delivered after a few strong abdominal contractions, with the entire litter being born in just a few hours. Pauses in the delivery process are perfectly fine, but if your queen is in active labor and straining for more than 1 hour without producing a kitten, you should call your veterinarian.

A placenta is often passed immediately after each kitten is born. The female will lick each newborn to clean off the translucent membranes covering their bodies. She will chew the umbilical cord to separate the placenta and unless you intervene, she will more than likely eat it.

Most mother cats stay with the kitten except for very short periods of time to eat and eliminate. ***NOTE: Female cats can and do go into heat and can become pregnant as little as a few days after delivering a litter.*** Mothers will move the litter to a more secluded nest if the kittens are handled too often.

Mother cats rarely require assistance in the delivery of their kittens. Your most significant contribution to the birth will be to provide appropriate prenatal care to the mother. This should include immunizations, attention to her nutrition and parasite control.

Pregnant cats should be fed a high-quality diet formulated specifically for kittens beginning in the last third of the pregnancy when the fetuses are in their rapid growth stage. Continue to feed the mother this food until the kittens are weaned. The nutritional requirements for energy and protein for pregnant and nursing cats are about double those of a healthy nonpregnant cat. A diet formulated to support nonpregnant adult cats may be inadequate in energy, protein, and minerals for the pregnant or nursing queen.

Although problems related to queening (the delivery of kittens) are rare, there are a few precautions you should take. If you know the breeding dates for the mother, calculate the approximate delivery date on your calendar. Watch for any subtle signs of nesting behavior as this date approaches. You can check her body temperature, but this intrusion may delay delivery.

Under no circumstances should you intervene in the delivery unless a problem arises. Have some soft hand towels ready to help the mother remove the fetal membranes and dry off the kittens if problems do arise. The mother will clean the kitten and detach the umbilical cord from the placenta in plenty of time, unless two kittens are born in quick succession. In this case, you can wipe the kittens' noses and mouths free from fluid and membranes, watch for breathing, and let the mother continue with her thing.

PROBLEMS WITH DELIVERY: DYSTOCIA

Beware of the few signs that could indicate a potential problem with the births. If you see any of the signs in the table below, you should immediately consult your veterinarian.

Signs of Potential Problems Related to Birth	
Problem	Possible Causes
Bloody vaginal discharge	Before 8 weeks gestation: possible abortion or resorption of the litter. After 8 weeks gestation: premature delivery.
Smelly vaginal discharge	Infected uterus. Dead kitten.
Prolonged gestation	Dead fetus. Earlier resorption. Failure to conceive. Inaccurate mating dates.
Straining to deliver more than 45 minutes	Uterus weak, tired. Kitten too large to pass through birth canal. Abortion.
Kitten stuck in birth canal	Too large to be delivered. Kitten dead. Uterus weak. Mother fatigued.
Failure to pass placenta	Passed but mother consumed. Retained placenta.
Hole in kitten's abdomen	Umbilical cord cut too close. Hernia. Congenital defect.
Deformed kitten	Congenital defect. Genetic defect. Infection <i>in utero</i> .

Kittens are born covered by a set of thin, transparent membranes. As a kitten passes through the birth canal, these membranes break and partially slide off. The mother licks the remnants of the membranes from around the kitten's face and body. The action of her tongue helps stimulate the kitten to breathe. There will be some initial gasps through the tiny mouth. Within seconds, the kitten will begin shallow, rapid respirations.

As the mother licks the kitten's body and encounters the umbilical cord, she chews it and frees the kitten from the placenta. It is common but not necessary for the mother to also consume the placenta. (The placenta is the pulplike mass included with the fetal membranes.)

NEONATAL CARE

Even primiparous (first-time) mothers instinctively know how to take care of the litter. Mothers don't leave their kittens except to eat and eliminate. Newborn kittens sleep continuously except to nurse. The mother stimulates them to urinate and defecate by licking, and she consumes the feces and urine.

Your role is to make sure that all the kittens are given attention and are nursing. The mother may push weak or sick kittens out of the nest. An inexperienced mother may abandon a kitten or the entire litter. Newborn kittens can't maintain their body temperature on their own. They stay warm by snuggling against the mother and each other. Abandoned kittens lose body heat very quickly. Once the body temperature drops below 96°F (35.6°C), the kitten can't absorb nutrients from his mother's milk or milk replacement formulas. These kittens can die within a few hours. Contact your veterinarian if any of your kittens are weak and/or nursing poorly. They will give you instructions on supplemental feeding and care.

Newborn kittens spend most of their time sleeping, waking only briefly every hour or so to nurse. At about 17 days of age, their ears and then their eyes will open and they will begin to explore the nest in a bobbing, uncoordinated, and very vocal fashion. By three weeks of age, the kittens' movements have gained coordination and they begin the play-behavior that is important in developing the fine motor skills necessary for hunting. Kittens begin social play as early as 5 weeks and continue at a high level until about 12-14 weeks. Play is an important component of kitten development, and proper play and exercise should be encouraged. The mother begins to wean the kittens at about 5 weeks, and at this time you should offer them a high-quality, very digestible kitten food. Kittens should remain with their mother and littermates until *at least* 6 weeks old but it is best for them to remain with mother for 8 weeks.

Make an appointment with your veterinarian for a health examination of the mother and kittens 2-3 days after they are born. Deworming should begin at 2 weeks of age and vaccinations should begin at 6 weeks of age.