

Caring for your kitten

cats.org.uk



Kittens are adorable, full of energy and playfulness. They can make wonderful companions as they grow up and become an important part of your family. Providing a home for a kitten is a big commitment for their lifetime, which could be 15 to 20 years. So we've written this guide to provide information how to care for your kitten.

There are responsibilities involved in owning any cat and if you are thinking about adopting a kitten, we would recommend you first read our *Caring for your cat* guide at [**cats.org.uk/information-leaflets**](https://cats.org.uk/information-leaflets)

Your new kitten will be a cat before you know it and you will need to understand how to care for them throughout their life. However, there are also some additional considerations for kittens which this guide highlights. Although they don't stay young for long, the care you provide for your kitten will help ensure their happiness and set the path for you both to enjoy a lasting companionship.

One kitten or a pair?

This is often a personal decision for owners, based on:

- their lifestyle
- home and surrounding environment
- the number of cats in the local area
- the extra cost of having a second kitten

If you are thinking of getting a pair of kittens, a sibling pair is often preferable to two unrelated kittens. Character is more important than gender. If you are looking for a family pet for a busy home, look for a kitten who is keen to approach visitors and playful with their siblings. It will help if they have been already introduced to children and household noises in a positive way. Be aware that kittens who seem quieter or shy may potentially grow up to be a more fearful cat. This is fine if you are prepared to care for this type of cat and cater to their needs, but they may be less suited to a busy or noisy household.

Two kittens homed from the same litter may remain close to each other as they approach adulthood. They will need separate essential items, such as litter trays and food bowls. Kittens may grow apart as they approach social maturity between 18 months and four years of age.

As such they will also need their own territory as well as separate essential items to avoid conflict. Find out more: cats.org.uk/other-cats

Feeding

Kittens need:

- fresh water
- good quality, complete kitten food from a reputable retailer, to ensure their nutritional needs are met
- water and food should be readily available and easy to find

Kittens prefer to eat little and often and should be fed at least four times a day. Follow the manufacturer's instructions on the cat food packaging as a guide.

Young kittens rarely overeat. Once neutered and as their growth rate slows over six months old, their weight should be monitored to avoid under or over feeding.

Speak to your vet about the most appropriate diet and feeding regime for your kitten. Find out more: cats.org.uk/feeding

Sleep

Kittens are really playful and can race around and then fall asleep exhausted the next moment. A sleeping kitten can be very endearing, but it is important not to disturb them. Good-quality sleep is needed for their physical and mental development. Just like babies, kittens need lots of sleep, so make sure they get plenty of time to rest.

Behavioural development and promoting the behaviour you want

Kittens do not stay young for long. The correct care in the early weeks and months can help them to learn what is normal and safe. This sensitive period of development which occurs between two and seven weeks of age is called the 'socialisation period'. During this time, kittens' brains and sensory systems are still developing. The things they see, hear, touch, smell and taste affect how this development occurs. This allows young cats to quickly understand what is normal about their world and what they should avoid.

If a kitten has been raised with their mother it is recommended that they stay with her until they are at least eight weeks of age so they can learn from her. Find out more:

cats.org.uk/pregnancy-and-kitten-care

Socialisation and getting used to the home environment

The greater the variety of positive experiences kittens have between two and seven weeks of age, such as different sights, sounds and smells, the more likely they are to be able to adapt to whatever they encounter in the future.

Kittens who have not been exposed to positive, new experiences during this sensitive period are more likely to be scared of novelty later in life. Cats born without exposure to people during this period of time cannot usually be tamed and will remain scared of people throughout their lives, becoming feral cats.

This is why it is important for kittens to be socialised before seven weeks of age. Examples of socialisation include:

- meeting different types of people from babies to adults
- being gently touched and handled
- getting used to hearing different sounds such as the noise of the washing machine and vacuum cleaner

Remember to ensure the kittens find these experiences enjoyable rather than threatening. Keep the training experiences short and allow your kitten to leave if they want.

Most kittens do not stay in the home in which they are born and are acquired by their owners when they are aged eight weeks or over. This means they have reached the end of their socialisation period to learn what is normal about their world. When choosing a kitten, try to find out how well socialised they are, so that you can choose a kitten most likely to be happy and thrive in your home.

When kittens over seven weeks of age are introduced to new experiences, it is important to go at a slow pace. Provide them with a quiet, dedicated room. Allow them to explore at their own pace to help them build confidence and reduce the risk of anxiety and behavioural problems. Patience at the start will reap rewards later.

The importance of play

During normal development:

- kittens start to play with each other at four weeks old, as a way of practising hunting
- between five to six weeks of age, kittens will show hiding and searching behaviours. These are either directed at another kitten or an object in their environment

- between seven and eight weeks of age, kittens will start to play with objects in their environment. To start with, kittens play with all sorts of objects. Playing with objects helps kittens to develop their balance and eye-paw co-ordination. As they grow older their play time will increase
- interactive play, including chasing behaviour, continues until it peaks at approximately 12 to 14 weeks of age

Do not encourage your kitten to play with your fingers or toes as this will cause them to associate hands and feet with play. It may be fun when they're a kitten but can be painful when they become an adult cat. If they try to pounce on you, keep perfectly still, so there is nothing exciting for them to chase.

Often this type of predatory aggression appears as 'ambushing' where the cat lies in wait, ready to attack as soon as someone walks by. Find out more: cats.org.uk/managing-cat-behaviour

Encouraging appropriate play

Cats showing attacking behaviour may be showing boredom. Give them suitable toys to attack instead. This will provide great mental stimulation and physical exercise.

- Time should be spent playing with the kitten or cat every day
- Games should be distant from your body, for example using 'fishing rod' type toys and ping pong balls
- Change the toys often to keep the games interesting
- Never leave your kitten or cat unsupervised with toys which might be shredded or eaten, or they could get tangled in
- Check toys regularly for signs of wear, replacing when appropriate

Consistency

Be consistent in your approach to a kitten. Make sure everyone in the household knows what is and isn't allowed. For example, don't let your kitten in a room one day, but not another. This will confuse them and may lead to behaviour you don't want.

Never punish your kitten. This can make them anxious or fearful. Gently say 'no' and ignore them for a short while or distract them with a toy. Reward the behaviour you do want by offering praise or a small treat.

Remember there are certain natural behaviours for cats:

- hiding
- climbing
- hunting or predatory-style playing
- toileting
- scratching

Give your cat opportunities to express these in ways that are acceptable to you both. Otherwise they may find options you find less appealing, such as shredding the curtains!

Litter training

When it comes to litter training, most cats are quick to learn. Usually they just need to be shown the litter tray and they know what to do. Kittens learn an association between going to the toilet and the material that is under their feet. The kitten forms a preference for toileting on that type of surface and will generally prefer this material throughout life.

Try to provide the litter type they have been accustomed to using already and make any changes gradually.

Remember that kittens grow up quickly and will soon need a larger, adult-sized tray instead of their kitten tray. Even if your kitten later prefers to toilet outside, always have a litter tray inside available.

- Provide one litter tray per cat, plus one extra
- Don't place all the trays in a line as the cats will see it as just one big litter tray. Place them in different, quiet, private areas of the home, away from food and water bowls
- Do not disturb your kitten when they are using the tray
- Allow access without having to pass other cats or things that make them anxious such as a noisy washing machine
- Clean out the litter tray at least once a day. With clumping litter remove solid lumps once or twice a day (with some types of litter you may need to replace all the litter on a daily basis)
- Cats prefer at least 3cm depth of litter and most prefer a litter of a sandy texture because it is softer and more comfortable under their paws
- Make any changes to the tray, the litter or its location very gradually to avoid toileting accidents

- Trays should be cleaned once a week by rinsing with water and then using a cat-safe disinfectant. Caution: phenol-based disinfectants are toxic to cats
- Always rinse carefully with hot water, and dry well before refilling with litter
- Rinsing the disinfectant off ensures safety, as well as removing the smell which some cats don't like

You will be able to buy a suitable disinfectant from your vet or a pet shop.

Handling

How comfortable your kitten is with handling will depend on their first two to seven weeks of their life, the socialisation period. This is why it is important to get your kitten from a reputable source.

Positive handling helps with basic health.

Checks include:

- checking their mouth and teeth (to progress to brushing their teeth only once their adult teeth emerge). Find out more: cats.org.uk/dental-care
- checking their ears
- checking their paws

- applying flea treatment.
Find out more: cats.org.uk/fleas
- giving tablets such as worming treatment. Find out more: cats.org.uk/giving-your-cat-a-tablet

When doing any form of handling, always make sure you respond to the kitten. Start slow, allow them to approach you initially and when introducing handling, do it for short sessions. Avoid holding a kitten for long periods of time, seconds can be enough in the first instance. If the kitten vocalises or looks distressed, stop. Break the process into the smallest possible steps, don't do too much in one time, and gradually build it up over time.

Find out more: cats.org.uk/kitten-socialisation

Grooming

Both long-haired and short-haired cats may need to be groomed. It is much less stressful for the cat if they have been introduced to grooming at a young age. It is important to gently groom your kitten regularly so they get used to the feeling of being brushed. Grooming will help to keep your kitten's coat and skin healthy.

Grooming is also a great way to bond with your cat and some cats really enjoy being brushed. Many cats need to be groomed regularly, particularly when they are elderly as they can struggle to keep their coat in good condition. It is a useful opportunity to check for injuries or lumps on the body.

There are a variety of kitten brushes and grooming tools available.

When first introducing a grooming tool to your kitten present it to them to sniff and explore. Then hold it for them to voluntarily rub against. Then you can start to groom your kitten for short periods while offering praise or small treats so that they form a positive association with grooming. For many cats, if done correctly, grooming itself will be rewarding for them.

Check out our helpful advice and videos on grooming: cats.org.uk/grooming

Veterinary care

Find a vet

You'll need to register your kitten with a vet as soon as possible. A recommendation from a friend or neighbour is a great place to start. You can also find details of your local practices on the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons website rcvs.org.uk

It's important that you get on with your vet, are able to ask questions and have faith in the care they can offer.

Take your kitten for a health check as soon as you can, as well as any time that they are ill or injured.

Due to their small body size and developing immune systems, a kitten's health can deteriorate very quickly. Take them straight to your vet if they are unwell. Discuss all aspects of your cat's care with your vet. Consider taking out pet insurance to ensure you can afford veterinary treatment should your cat be injured or fall ill unexpectedly.

Find out more: cats.org.uk/finding-a-vet

Vaccination

Vaccination helps protect against some serious infectious diseases. The vaccination course should start when kittens are eight to nine weeks old. They will require at least one further vaccination three to four weeks later.

Even if your kitten is kept indoors, it is recommended that they are vaccinated. They may be at risk of disease from other animals in the household or infections that have accidentally been transferred in from outside on a person's hands, shoes or clothes.

Speak to your vet to discuss your kitten's specific vaccination needs.

Find out more: cats.org.uk/vaccinations

Microchipping

Be sure to get your kitten microchipped before letting them outside for the first time.

Microchipping is the safest and permanent way to identify your cat. It is a quick and painless procedure that helps owners to be reunited with their cats should they stray or be involved in an accident. In England, microchipping is compulsory for all owned cats over 20 weeks of age.

A microchip is no bigger than a grain of rice and is inserted under the cat's skin between their shoulder blades. It carries a unique ID number linked to a database holding your contact details. This allows you to be quickly contacted should they be found and scanned.

It's important to update your details if you move house or change phone numbers. Find out more: cats.org.uk/microchipping

Parasites

There are many different types of parasites that can affect cats and some can be especially harmful to kittens.

Your vet can advise you on the best treatment regime based on your cat's lifestyle and individual risks.

Find out more: cats.org.uk/fleas

Neutering

Cats Protection recommends that cats are neutered at around four months of age. This is a simple operation which has many health benefits for your cat:

- to prevent unwanted kittens
- to reduce the spread of disease
- to reduce wandering
- to reduce territorial behaviour such as scratching, spraying and fighting

All cats from Cats Protection are neutered, if old enough, before being rehomed, or rehomed with a voucher for free neutering. Find out more:

cats.org.uk/neutering

Hazards

Kittens are very inquisitive and love to explore, but be aware that there can be hazards around the house. While you must always make sure your cat has a safe place where they can hide, it's important to kitten-proof the house to help keep your kitten safe. Kittens can squeeze into the smallest of spaces and have a habit of sleeping in peculiar places.

- Block off any gaps between cupboards, furniture and kitchen appliances
- Screen off open fireplaces and always supervise your kitten if you have lit a fire
- Keep cupboards, washing machines and tumble driers closed
- Toilet lids should be kept down, to avoid the risk of drowning or coming into contact with cleaning chemicals
- Ensure that hot liquids are never left unsupervised
- Keep all cables and wires securely protected and out of reach
- Remove any toxic plants or flowers from the house and garden if they will have outdoor access. Find out more: cats.org.uk/plants

- Lock away medications and chemical substances such as cleaning products
- Choose toys carefully to ensure they are robust and have no small parts or thread which may be swallowed

Kittens should never have access to balconies. All external doors and windows should be kept closed, or safely fenced over with strong wire mesh. Ensure there are no gaps that your kitten could fall through. It is best to check kittens regularly through the day to ensure they are safe and well.

Be aware that while cats of all ages may damage soft furnishings, kittens, due to their inquisitive nature, are more prone to climb your furniture and generally cause more damage than adult cats.

Find out more: cats.org.uk/keeping-your-cat-safe

Bringing a new kitten home

The first few hours after bringing your cat home can affect how well they settle into their new surroundings. Always go at their pace, be patient and don't rush them.

Being creatures of habit, a change of environment is always stressful for a cat. It will often take a few weeks for them to gradually settle and feel safe in their new home.

They will need their own quiet place so set aside a dedicated, escape-proof room before you collect them. This room should include:

- separate food and water bowls placed away from each other (cats don't like their water contaminated by their food)
- at least one litter tray. Place it as far away as possible from their food and water and in a private, easy-to-access location
- somewhere to hide, such as a cardboard box
- something like a blanket that smells familiar because they have previously put their own scent on it
- access to a high spot where they can view their surroundings
- a suitable, comfortable place to sleep or, ideally, a choice of them
- a scratching post
- a few cat toys and space for them to play

It is best not to leave your kitten alone until they have settled. Allow them space to explore their new surroundings while you watch from close by. Provide them with a warm, secure bed at ground level, a cardboard box will do. Once they've had a look around, show them where their litter tray,

bowls and bed are by gently tapping these items. They may feel a little unsettled if they were used to living with their mother and siblings. When you are not there, a soft toy or low-volume radio might help them feel at ease.

Find out more: cats.org.uk/kittens

Introducing your kitten to others in the household

Kittens and children

Kittens are more fragile and injured more easily than adult cats. They can still be a suitable pet for children providing there are careful measures in place to ensure a mutually beneficial relationship. Growing up with a pet can be an extremely rewarding experience for any youngster. Many children regard their cat as their best friend.

It is through this friendship that important lessons are learned in trust, empathy, care and love, which help children become responsible and caring adults. When choosing a kitten, look for one that is responsive, energetic and happy to approach you. Don't allow any encounters that hurt or frighten the kitten as it may lead to a negative association and the kitten may grow up to resent being handled.

From their earliest days, children can be taught to be gentle and kind with kittens. Children learn best by example, so if you treat your kitten gently with love and respect, it's more likely your children will grow up to do the same.

When your children are old enough to understand, explain that kittens like to be left alone when sleeping, hiding, toileting or eating. Tell them cats can become frightened when people shout, make sudden movements or try to grab them. Kittens are very active and care needs to be taken as they can climb up legs, or inadvertently scratch or bite while playing.

Always supervise your child when they are interacting with your kitten and ensure it is a positive experience for both the kitten and the child.

Signs of an unhappy cat:

- swishing tail
- ruffled-up fur
- hissing

Your children will love helping to take care of your kitten too. Involve them in the feeding, grooming and playing routines and you'll have happy children and a happy kitten!

Kittens are particularly delicate and, just like babies, they need lots of sleep. Make sure your kitten is handled carefully and gets plenty of time to rest. Provide a room or area in the house that is out of bounds to children where your kitten can be undisturbed.

When they are awake, they need short, intensive play sessions, while ensuring that they do not become too exhausted.

Fishing rod toys are a great way for children to interact safely with kittens, while teaching the kitten appropriate items on which to direct play behaviour. Small treats can be given to kittens to form positive associations with children.

Find out more: cats.org.uk/meeting-other-people

Kittens and cats

Introducing unfamiliar cats and kittens should be done very slowly. There is no guarantee that they will peacefully live together. This process can be helped by initially swapping items which have the scent of each cat, then having a very gradual introduction where both cats are safe and can retreat if needed. Provide separate bowls and litter trays in a variety of different places in the home to avoid conflict and competition.

If cats are forced together too quickly, it may lead to lifelong conflict and stress which is difficult to resolve. First impressions are all important.

Find out more: cats.org.uk/other-cats

Kittens and dogs

A slow and gradual introduction can make all the difference when introducing a kitten and a dog to each other. However, this is no guarantee of success and some cats will never get along with a dog.

It can be easier if the kitten had positive experiences with dogs during the socialisation period of two to seven weeks of age and vice versa.

Find out more: cats.org.uk/dogs-and-other-pets

Letting your kitten outside

There is a small risk that young cats may become lost through straying or being involved in road traffic accidents. However, allowing your cat outside access will provide them with opportunities to express their natural behaviour. It is sensible to take adequate precautions before first letting your kitten outside.

Don't risk letting your kitten outside until they have:

- adjusted to their new indoor environment and consider it home. The time this takes will depend on the individual kitten but will usually be a few weeks at least. Your kitten should be showing confidence around you and others in the home. They will have built up a scent profile enabling them to find their way back
- been fully vaccinated to protect them against some infectious diseases they may encounter outside
- been neutered. Cats reach sexual maturity from four months of age. Until this has been done ensure only supervised access outside and promptly arrange your kitten's neutering
- been microchipped. It is important that you can be traced quickly in case your kitten becomes lost and is found by someone else

When you do let them out:

- do it when it is quiet and just before a mealtime when they are hungry so you can call them back with their favourite food
- open the door and step outside, encouraging your cat to go with you
- don't pick them up. Let them make the decision to go outside themselves

- leave the door open so they can run back into the house if they feel insecure
- only let them out for short periods at first. You can gradually build up the time they are out until you are confident they can come and go as they please. Always keep them in at night, to protect them from injury and reduce hunting of wildlife
- make sure the immediate environment does not contain hazards

Find out more:

cats.org.uk/keeping-cats-safe-outside

Cat flap training

Kittens usually learn how to use a cat flap quite quickly.

- Start training them by holding the flap open and luring them near the cat flap with treats
- Give them the treats, little and often, to reward their progress while training
- Hold the treat the other side of the cat flap and call their name to encourage them to go through
- Repeat the process until they go through the cat flap quite happily in both directions

Gradually, your kitten will learn to use some force when going through the cat flap and by giving them some encouragement and praise, they'll soon be able to use it properly.

Find out more: cats.org.uk/cat-flaps

Looking for cat advice?

The following vet-approved guides are available to download from

cats.org.uk/information-leaflets

Essential guides

Behaviour: Understanding your cat's behaviour W84009

Behaviour: Managing your cat's behaviour W84010

Bringing your cat home W84002

Caring for your cat W84001

Caring for your kitten W84015

Cats and people W84014

Cats living together W84011

Elderly cats W84016

End-of-life, grief and loss W84007

Feeding and obesity W84004

Feral cats W84017

Indoor and outdoor cats W84012

Keeping your cat safe W84005

Microchipping W84008

Moving home W84003

Neutering W84006

Pregnant cats, birth and care of young kittens W84018

Veterinary guides

Arthritis W83201

Cat flu W83216

Digestive disorders: vomiting and diarrhoea W83218

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukaemia virus (FeLV) W83209

Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD) W83202

Fleas and other parasites W83215

Heart murmurs and heart disease W83211

Hyperthyroidism W83212

Infectious disease and vaccination W83217

Kidney or renal disease W83206

Skin disorders W83204

Teeth and oral health W83214

Please see cats.org.uk for more information on:

Cats and pregnant women: toxoplasmosis

Cats and the law

Cats with disabilities

Diabetes

Feline asthma

Feline coronavirus (FCoV) and feline infectious peritonitis (FIP)

Feline parvovirus (FPV)

Hypertension

You and your vet

For more information about Cats Protection or to find out how you can support us, go to cats.org.uk



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