

What to expect when your cat is expecting

Cats are very efficient at reproducing and are able to have several litters a year.

Most cats go through puberty at an early age – somewhere between 5 and 9 months.



DR. ELAINE WEXLER-MITCHELL
THE CAT DOC

This is why it is so important to sterilize your cat at the time recommended by your veterinarian (typically 4 to 6 months of age). Female cats can be fertile for about seven years, while males may be able to reproduce for 11 years or longer!

The large numbers of feral cats (animals that have returned to a wild existence) demonstrate that in an uncontrolled environment, they will keep reproducing. Today's methods of feline sterilization are surgical and thus not easily applied to the vast number of feral cats. Researchers are working on new methods of feline contraception, including oral medications and even vaccines. We look for-

ward to new options to stop kitty overpopulation in the future.

Cats going into heat seasonally, triggered by 12 or more hours of daylight. Pubescent cats will repeat their heat cycles every two to three weeks until they are bred or induced to ovulate.

Female cats in heat do not bleed like dogs, and instead have changes in behavior. The changes can include increased vocalization, rolling on the ground and crying, lying on her belly with her rear end pushed up in the air, acting more affectionate, attempting to escape from the house, urinating outside the litter box or spraying on vertical surfaces.

If a cat is in heat and is given the opportunity to be with an intact male, chances she will get pregnant. The average queen is pregnant for 63 to 65 days.

Cats do not need much special care to maintain a pregnancy and do well on their own. Other than allowing a queen to eat what she wants and protecting her from illness and parasites,

you can leave the rest to her. The progression includes:

- Increased appetite and weight gain
- "Pinking up" of the nipples within two weeks of being bred
- More rounded appearance of the abdomen
- Engorgement of the mammary glands

A veterinarian can palpate a female cat's abdomen and confirm a pregnancy three to four weeks into gestation. The fetuses develop more calcified bones at about 54 days of gestation, so an X-ray at this time can tell how many kittens will be born. Litters average three to five kittens but can vary a lot. X-rays do not damage the fetuses.

A pregnant queen is getting close to delivery time when she shows interest in creating a nest for her kittens. Milk will be present in her mammary glands a few days before she delivers.

Next up: What happens during labor and what to do with new kittens.

Dr. Wexler-Mitchell owns The Cat Care Clinic in Orange, 714-282-2287.