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KITTENS

Congratulations on your new kitten! We wish you many years of good health and companionship. Raising a kitten is generally easy and a lot of fun. As your kitten depends on you for care, we have put together some basic information and recommendations to help you get things off to a healthy start.

VACCINES: Starting at 6 to 8 weeks of age, a “distemper” vaccine is given every 3 to 4 weeks until around 15 to 16 weeks of age. This vaccine (also called FVRCP), protects against feline panleukopenia (“distemper”) which affects the bone marrow, brain cells, and other internal organs. It also protects against two respiratory viruses: feline herpes (feline viral rhinotracheitis), and feline calicivirus. This vaccine is boosted one year after finishing the last kitten vaccine, then it is given every three years.

A rabies vaccine should be given to all cats once they are three months of age or older, including indoor cats. Massachusetts law requires that all cats be vaccinated against rabies. Every summer we receive calls about cats having caught a bat in the house. Bats are a main carrier of rabies. Additionally, indoor cats frequently “escape” and unvaccinated cats can be subject to prolonged quarantine periods (or euthanasia) if even possibly exposed to rabies (e.g. a bite wound of unknown origin). We are using a rabies vaccine that is boosted yearly as there is, in our experience, a much smaller chance of a vaccine associated tumor developing compared to the three-year rabies vaccine historically used.

It is recommended that all kittens be vaccinated against feline leukemia virus. It is spread directly from cat to cat (via saliva mostly), and causes leukemia, lymphoma, and bone marrow failure. Young cats exposed to this virus are especially susceptible to contracting this highly fatal agent. Once cats are mature and it is certain they will be kept as exclusively indoor cats then this vaccine may be discontinued. It should be continued in cats with outdoor exposure into adulthood.

FEEDING: Cats are unique in their nutritional requirements. They have high protein needs, especially while growing and specific requirements for certain amino acids and essential fatty acids which are often lacking in non-cat food. We recommend feeding a well-balanced kitten food until 8 to 10 months of age, then an adult food. Supplements are not routinely required. It is a myth that cats know how much to eat, or else we wouldn't have cats that weigh in excess of 25 pounds! You need to control this. Feed kittens two to three times daily until three to four months of age, then twice daily. Leaving some dry food down throughout the day for snacking is ok (but watch the weight!). Cats and kittens do NOT need milk; in fact, it can cause diarrhea. Fresh water should always be available.

PARASITES: Kittens are predisposed to infestation with a variety of parasites. Intestinal parasites (such as roundworms and coccidia), ear mites, and fleas are commonly seen and can cause significant illness. A stool sample should always be checked, especially if any loose stool or vomiting is seen. The majority of these parasites are easily treated if found.

TOYS: Kittens (and older cats) will often play with items which pose a potential danger. If swallowed, string, yarn, tinsel, etc. can become "caught" in the intestines, requiring surgery; they should never be given as toys. Anything used as a toy should not be something that could be easily swallowed. Also, cats will sometimes eat dental floss, elastics and other objects that can result in intestinal problems (or surgery).

SCRATCHING POST: It is recommended that a scratching post be available for all kittens and cats. The post should be covered by a coarse, burlap-like fabric, such as sisal, and be tall enough for the cat to stretch out. Some cats will prefer wood (such as a fencepost or log). Other cats prefer a flat surface to the floor or at a slight incline. Placing catnip on the post enhances its use; you will be more successful in getting your cat to stop using the furniture if a post is made available! Try to trim the cats nails every 4 to 8 weeks. Starting in "kittenhood" helps develop tolerance for trimming as the kitten ages. The use of two-sided sticky tape (such as "Sticky Paws") can be very effective to prevent unwanted scratching on furniture, rugs, etc.

LITTERBOX: Kittens and cats are very clean, fastidious creatures. If a litter box becomes too dirty it may be shunned by the cat, leading to elimination issues. In general, cats prefer a large litterbox with clumping type litter that is not heavily perfumed. You should have at least one litterbox per cat, and the litter boxes should be scooped at least once daily. Every few weeks the litter should be changed and the box washed with mild soap and water.

Women who are pregnant should avoid cat litter due to the (remote) possibility of toxoplasmosis exposure.

SPAYING AND NEUTERING: Spaying (females) and neutering (males) should be done at 6 months of age on all cats not to be used for breeding. There are sound behavioral and medical reasons for spaying and neutering. Mammary tumor incidence is reduced in spayed females. Neutered males are less likely to "spray" urine around the house. Additionally, each year several million unwanted cats are destroyed for lack of homes. Reproductive capability can be reached shortly after 6 to 7 months of age.

FELINE AIDS VIRUS: Cats can be infested with their own strain of the AIDS virus. Called FIV (for feline immunodeficiency virus), this virus infects **only** cats and is not a threat to humans or other animals. It is spread mainly in saliva, such as cat bites. Keeping the cat indoor will prevent exposure to this disease. FIV results in susceptibility to a wide variety of infections and a "wasting" syndrome. Cats can carry the virus for several months or even years before appearing ill. There is a vaccine available against FIV. This vaccine can be administered to outdoor cats at risk of exposure. At the present time cats given this vaccine will test positive for the FIV virus. This can result in some confusion as to whether or not a true infection is present. As it is considered of limited efficacy, the vaccine is not commonly administered.

MEDICATION SENSITIVITIES: Cats are very sensitive to certain common household medications. It is best to check with a veterinarian before administering any medications not specifically dispensed for cats. As an example, Acetaminophen (Tylenol) is very toxic to cats and should never be administered.

FLEAS AND TICKS: Outdoor cats frequently pick up fleas and ticks in the spring through fall seasons. There are very effective products which only need to be applied topically on a monthly basis. The area used to apply the product is usually on the back between the shoulder blades. Be very careful that the product is safe for use in cats. Many over-the-counter products are extremely toxic to cats.

If collars are used, they should be “break away” types for safety, should the collar get caught on something.

HEARTWORM DISEASE: While heartworm is a disease we normally associate with dogs; cats can get heartworm too. They are less susceptible to heartworm, tend to have fewer worms and may clear their infections over time. Reliable tests and safe treatments for feline heartworm disease are lacking. A safe preventative is available for feline heartworm in the form of a monthly medication. While feline heartworm is less common than canine heartworm, it too is now preventable.

MICROCHIPPING: A small microchip can be placed under the skin for identification purposed if your pet is lost. Most veterinary hospitals and shelters have scanners to recognize these chips. The chip gives information used to determine where the pet lives.

KEEP INDOORS: We strongly recommend that all cats be kept indoors. Many commonly seen disease and traumas can be prevented. Also less vaccination is needed and the lifespan is many times years longer for indoor cats.