

What to expect with kittens on the way

Editor's note: *This is Part 2 of a series by Dr. Wexler-Mitchell on pregnancy and cats.*

You have a pregnant queen, and it's getting close to the time when the kittens will arrive.



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What do you do? It is best if you can arrange a quiet, comfortable spot for her to deliver and then start acclimating her to this site a week or so before the kittens are due.

Cats prefer to give birth in an area away from noise and human activity. A large box in an accessible closet or in the corner of a room works well. Start feeding her in that area and make a bed for her to use. Have a litter box close by.

The length of a queen's labor depends on whether she has had kittens before and how many kittens she is having. The period from the start of contractions to the end of labor can be minutes, hours, or even a day (if several breedings were responsible for the litter).

You may observe a mucus plug pass when labor begins. Contractions will follow and kittens will be born. The queen will lick and remove the sac from around the kitten. (If she does not, the kitten can suffocate and you need to intervene.) The queen will then bite off the umbilical cord that connects the kit-

ten to the placenta.

The queen may continue her labor and produce more kittens. She will continue to lick and clean the kittens that have been born and then gently nudge them toward her nipples so that they begin to nurse. Kittens receive their initial immunity to disease by absorbing antibodies present in their mother's colostrum.

The queen may eat the placentas, and as unappetizing as this looks, it is very normal. She may have a discharge for up to two weeks after giving birth. The discharge might look like blood or might even be tinged green, but it should not look or smell like pus.

If you have a queen who likes to roam, try to confine her in a room with her kittens. Be sure to keep fleas controlled because they can cause life-threatening anemia. Let the queen eat everything she wants. Nursing kittens is a big energy drain on her system.

If a queen is having contractions for an hour without producing a kitten, seek veterinary help. A veterinarian will likely take an X-ray to see where the kittens are and then see if there are other abnormalities.

Labor can be induced with drugs but some cats require Caesarean sections if drug therapy is not successful. It is best when a queen is able to pass the kittens vaginally, because there is more risk of complications with surgery.

Unfortunately, kittens can be stillborn. If a kitten is not crying and wiggling af-

ter the placenta has been removed, pick her up and try to see if she is alive. You can gently shake her upside down to try to clear any mucus from her mouth and throat. Touch the chest to check for a heartbeat. Check for jaw and muscle tone by opening the mouth and moving the limbs, and if all feels limp, the kitten is probably not alive.

Within a few hours of delivery, you should check the kittens for any apparent birth defects. Open the mouth and look for a hole in the roof of the mouth. This is called a cleft palate. Check to see that there are four legs and a tail. Check the umbilical area and make sure a hole is not present in the abdominal wall. Check under the tail to see if there is an anus and some genitalia. Kittens will get their first set of teeth and their eye color changes around 4 weeks of age.

Kittens typically nurse from their mothers for four to six weeks. The weaning process can begin at 4 weeks. Kittens will be stronger and healthier if they can stay with their mother and litter mates until they are at least 8 weeks old. The critical socialization period for kittens is 2 to 7 weeks of age. Kittens that are handled by multiple people and exposed to other animals during this time tend to be easier to handle and enjoy human attention more.

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