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Taking care of your kitten

1. Welcome home, kitty

All kittens are adorable and it can be tempting to take one home without thinking of the consequences. Just like children, kittens can be destructive and very demanding.

Taken away from its mother, brothers and sisters, your kitten will feel very lonely once you bring it home. In order to relieve the stress for him, it is essential that you are perfectly ready to welcome your kitten.

a) No excitement

Move gently and without shouting. Avoid handling the kitten excessively. An excessively noisy or agitated atmosphere causes your kitten to be a nervous and fearful adult.

b) With children

Children often tend to almost smother the new arrival with attention. An adult cat is perfectly capable of avoiding children, when it doesn't want to be bothered, but a kitten is not. Explain to the children that the kitten is not a toy, that it needs lots of sleep and that they are forbidden to wake it up just to cuddle. It is best to always let them play with the kitten under supervision.

c) The right moves

Remember to handle your kitten carefully. Any rough or sudden movement can terrify your kitten.

The wrong moves

- Pull its tail
- Take it by the head

Good habits to adopt

- Don't leave plastic bags or things made from foam lying around
- Close the trash can lid and the toilet seat cover (careful with trash bag ties, which all cats love to swallow)
- Cover electric hotplates with proper protection
- Limit access to balconies and decks if possible
- Be careful with irons. They are often responsible for burns

d) Bedding

Your kitten needs somewhere comfortable to sleep and access to somewhere protected from the weather so they do not get too hot or cold. Young kittens' bodies are too small to retain body heat well, so they need somewhere warm to be. On the first few nights a warm water bottle under a blanket may help to compensate for the absence of the kitten's mother or littermates.

e) What to buy

Here is a reminder of some useful items:

- Food and water bowl – one of each
- Food
- Clean and comfortable kitten bed and blankets
- Litter box
- Cat litter
- Brush and comb
- Shampoo for cats (if you want to bath him)
- Toothbrush and toothpaste
- Toys and scratch pole
- Cat treats

2. Veterinary Care

a) Vaccinations

Your kitty will need shots to prevent diseases, just as children do. Some of the diseases they are vaccinated against can be potentially fatal. It is therefore essential to keep a vaccination schedule as directed by your veterinarian and follow up with regular boosters throughout your cat's life.

We recommend the following for optimum protection:

- 6-8 weeks – Feline Enteritis, Feline Respiratory Disease, Feline Chlamydiosis,
- 12 weeks – Feline Enteritis, Feline Respiratory Disease, Feline Chlamydiosis, Rabies
- Yearly – Booster and Rabies

b) Deworming

The most common worms affecting kittens are roundworms. They are passed to the kitten through the mother's milk. Worms are a common cause of ill health in pets and can cause loss of appetite, vomiting and diarrhoea and in some cases even death. Regular deworming by your veterinarian will solve the problem.

Don't be tempted to use non-veterinary products, although cheaper, they are not nearly as effective. We recommend deworming with every vaccination and then at 3 monthly intervals, lifelong.

c) Fleas

Your kitten could have dog or cat fleas – fleas aren't picky, and as well as causing itching in your cat, will bite humans too. You need to treat your kitten, the bed and the house itself, ideally with a product which "breaks" the fleas' lifecycle, otherwise re-infestation will keep on occurring. The simplest way is to use one of the "spot-on" products your vet can recommend. It is also important to remember that fleas transmit tapeworm, therefore deworming is essential.

The little 'passengers' your pet could carry aren't good for it's health – so regular worm and flea control is essential.

d) Tests for Feline Leukaemia and FIV

These are two dangerous cat diseases which are affecting more and more of our beloved cat population. Feline Leukaemia (FeLeuk) and Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) are diseases that attack the immune system much like HIV Virus in humans. (Neither of these diseases can be transmitted to humans). We recommend testing at 3 months of age.

e) **Neutering**

We strongly recommend neutering all cats, male and female, at 6 months of age. Except for reducing the number of unwanted pregnancies, de-sexing prevents pets from roaming, fighting, spraying and night prowling.

3. **What to feed your kitten**

a) **Your kitten's first meals**

- Clean and fresh water should always be available
- Ask what your kitten is eating before he comes home, and keep it on that food for a week or so before you change it. The most important thing to remember with feeding kittens is that their digestive systems are still developing – so they are prone to upset tummies.
- Try an ultra-digestible for kittens and frequent small meals.
- Divide the daily amount of food (the packaging will show you how much you should feed per day) into:
 - Kittens 8-12 weeks: need 4 meals per day
 - 3-6 months: needs 3 meals per day
 - >6 months: need 2 meals per day
- Cats often prefer to eat several small meals per day, but will do equally well if fed one meal at the same time each day.
- Milk is unnecessary and can cause diarrhoea in those that are lactose intolerant.
- You should avoid any sudden change of food or otherwise run the risk of provoking digestive problems. Plan to continue with previously given food, at least for a few days. If you want to change its food, you should make sure there is a gradual transition from the old food to the new over a period of one week.

Food transition chart:

- 1st and 2nd days - 75% of previous food and 25% of new food
- 3rd and 4th days – 50% previous food and 50% new food
- 5th and 6th days – 25% previous food and 75% new food
- Final day: 100% new food

b) **What food to choose**

- There are many different types of pet food, but choosing the right one for your kitten is what really matters.
- A tailor made nutritional food available from your local veterinarian or vet shop will contain about 50 carefully selected nutrients, to provide exactly the right combination of ultra-digestible proteins, carbohydrates, fats and added vitamin and mineral complexes to safeguard your kitten's current and future health.

c) **Wet or dry?**

Dry food should be completely nutritionally balanced and it also has proven dental benefits.

d) **Human food**

Do not give human food. If you start with a balanced diet and add goodies from the table, you won't have a balanced diet anymore, and your kitten will have more digestive trouble.

e) **Chew treats, bones and toys**

Don't give your kitten anything small enough to swallow that can't be digested, or things that can be chewed into large indigestible chunks and swallowed. Avoid any bones (even chicken bones, rib bones etc.)

4. **Introducing your new kitten to your pets at home**

a) **Introduction to your other cats**

- Keep the new kitten in a separate room for a few days
- Associate the kitten and cats in the household with good things eg feed them on opposite sides of a closed door
- Then take a blanket or bowl with the kitten's scent on and give it to the adult cat.
- Praise, cuddle and generally worship the cat while it is near the object that smells like the kitten.
- When your adult cat is over the worst shock, leave the room open for periods of time so that the kitten can explore the house.
- Don't interfere unless your cat chases the kitten back into its room and corners it there.
- The process might take up to 2 months
- We have calming collars in stock that calms the adult cat

b) **Introduction to your dogs**

- If dogs are not used to cats from puppyhood, it might be extremely difficult or almost impossible.
- Keep the dogs and kitten separate until they are used to each other
- Never allow a dog to chase a kitten/cat.
- Choose a neutral room (not where any of the animals sleep or eat) and have the dog on a loose lead and the kitten loose so that it can climb away from the dog if it wants to.
- Give attention to the dogs calmly and every 5 to 10 minutes gently stroke the kitten.
- If the dogs run at the kitten/cats, give the lead one tug without talking to the dog.
- If the dogs walk up to the kitten, the kitten will most probably run off, or clout the dog across the nose. This is exactly what needs to happen.
- Repeat the procedure daily.
- May take up to 2 months to get them used to each other.

5. **Training your kitten**

a) **Socialising your kitten**

Kittenhood is a critical time for socialisation particularly between 10 and 20 weeks of age. We recommend socialising cats in a controlled way. Your kitten needs to experience lots of new situations, especially people and other animals.

Make sure you provide plenty of praise. Positive reinforcement for good behaviour achieves much better results than old fashioned punishment.

b) Toilet training

At least one litter tray should be provided for your kitten and changed daily. The tray should be somewhere private and quiet. As cats are fastidiously clean, your cat may refuse to use the tray if it is dirty. If you have more than one cat, providing at least one tray per cat plus one extra is advisable. Place the tray in a quiet accessible corner where your kitten will not be disturbed. Make sure that the litter tray is not next to food and water bowls. The kitten may be reluctant to use it if it is too close to its food.

c) Playing

Play time is very important to a little kitten. They learn to socialize, develop physical skills, get exercise and have fun! Young kittens don't know they are hurting you when they grab at or bite your hand or run up your pant leg, so be patient and forgiving. An idea which can help to save your arms from scratches is provide what we call a 'wrestle buddy' – a stuffed toy or old sock filled with soft cloth or socks – that they can be free to sink their little teeth and claws into.

d) Scratching

Your kitten will start to scratch at things at an early age. This is the time to start training him! Provide a small scratching post or flat scratching pad and keep it wherever he usually plays. Encourage him to use it by enticing him with a toy or catnip. Give him praises when he uses it, and give a loud yell when he scratches the wrong thing.

6. Oral health for kittens

a) Milk teeth

Good oral hygiene starts off when your kitten is young. When it comes home, it will still have its 'milk teeth' – shiny white 'needles' which will be tested out everywhere!

b) Adult teeth

Around the age of 4 months, its adult teeth start emerging. You might find the odd milk tooth lying around from time to time, but most of the time the kitten swallows them.

c) Brushing your kitten's teeth

Tooth brushing is highly recommended. Starting young with a special toothbrush and veterinary toothpaste, have clear benefits and helps your cat get used to the ritual of having his teeth brushed. We recommend brushing at least 5 X per week.

7. Bathing and grooming

Bathing

Kittens generally do not need real baths, unless they have gotten especially dirty or if they need special medicated baths.

Use a mild shampoo specifically for cats. Their skin differs from our skin.

Grooming

It is a good idea to accustom your kitten to being groomed from an early age, particularly if it has a long coat. A long-haired cat needs daily attention to keep fur free of tangles. Grooming removes excess loose hair which can cause fur balls to build up in the stomach. Always be gentle and make grooming a rewarding and pleasant experience.

8. Microchipping your kitten

How microchipping works:

Micro chipping, which is the painless insertion of a microchip under the skin on the neck, means that any vet or cat rescue organisation can 'read' the chip with a handheld scanner and your cat can be reunited with you quickly.

Your vet can perform the procedure at any of your routine appointments and it literally takes just seconds to make your cat identifiable for life. The chip number will be entered into a computer system which operates worldwide.

9. Kitten Insurance

Find the right cover for your cat

Every owner wants to do the best for their cat and vets try their hardest to keep costs reasonable, but there is no denying that accidents or long term illnesses can cause the veterinary bills to mount up. Insurance offers peace of mind that you will be able to provide the care your kitten needs, should a crisis happen. Pet insurances offer different levels of cover and prices vary according to your cat's age and breed. We have two different options in South Africa:

Petsure - www.petsure.co.za

Medipet – www.medipetsa.co.za

Have a look on the internet to find the package that suits you best.

The points of Responsible Pet Ownership (RPO)

- 1. Make provision for the care of your pet for its entire lifespan
- 2. Choose your pet carefully to match your lifestyle and home environment
- 3. Interact positively with your pet every day
- 4. Provide adequate shelter and protection from harm
- 5. Feed a 100% complete and balanced diet appropriate for your pet's age, size and lifestyle to meet your pet's nutritional needs and provide fresh, clean drinking water
- 6. Take your pet to a veterinarian for a wellness examination at least once a year
- 7. Ensure that your pet receives regular vaccinations at your local veterinarian throughout its life
- 8. Always choose an approved preventative treatment against external (fleas and ticks) and internal (worms) parasites and ensure that your pet is treated regularly
- 9. Responsible breeders should register their pet with a recognised breeder's association
- 10. All male and female pets should be sterilised if they are not intended to be bred