

An Annual Exam Can Extend Your Cat's Life

Your cat's health needs change with each passing year. Here's a lifetime guide to veterinary visits.

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"We're concerned about overloading kittens and cats with too many vaccinations," Strother says.

Discuss vaccine protocol with your veterinarian, Strother says, because he or she can make adjustments and accommodations, based on your cat's needs and where you live.

Talk about your kitten's dietary needs. "In general, kittens need a meat-based diet, balanced for growth one that's been properly tested," Hill says. She recommends using foods tested according to the Association of American Feed Control Officials standards and keeping the kitten on this diet for at least four to five months, preferably six to nine months.

Address parasite control at the second visit, when your kitten receives its second series of shots. You can control fleas and ticks orally, by injection or with topical treatments.

Consider the benefits of spay or neuter. Some veterinarians spay kittens as young as 6 weeks. Again, ask your veterinarian. Most often, kittens are spayed before they go into the first heat cycle around 6 months old.

You've made all these important decisions with your veterinarian's help. But the home-care you provide between appointments is equally essential to your cat's overall health.

Kittens need exercise and you may need to encourage it. Keep them from becoming plump couch potatoes by enticing them to chase toys. "Keep them lean and mean," Strother says.

Brushing your cat's teeth is easier if you start while he's young. Cat toothpaste comes in chicken and other flavors to make it more appealing. Tartar-control treats are also available. Before you do anything, check with your veterinarian who can examine the cat's teeth during the annual exam and schedule an appointment to remove plaque if necessary. Risks exist with this procedure because the cat must go under anesthesia, but new anesthesia is safer.