

Get Kittens Off to a Good Start

Holistic care can give kittens a healthy boost.

By Lisa Hanks

“Nutrition and lifestyle are key components to the health of any cat or kitten,” says Paula Terifaj, DVM, of Founders Veterinary Clinic in Brea, Calif., a holistic veterinarian for the past 10 years. “Good, natural nutrition is the best thing you can do for your kitten.”

The decisions you make now, especially about diet, can affect your kitten’s well-being for the rest of its life.

For optimum nutrition, Terifaj recommends raw, frozen diets or, at least, high-quality, natural canned foods. Feeding your kitten exclusively dry food might minimize your options down the road. As your cat grows, it might refuse to switch to raw, canned, or homemade food.

Look for conscientious manufacturers with a history of producing top-notch, natural, human-grade foods containing little to no grain.

To help prevent hairballs, Terifaj advises adding 1 to 2 tablespoons of pumpkin to your cat’s diet. Grooming three or more times a week will minimize hairballs, too, and it’s a fantastic opportunity to hang out with your kitty.

Kittenhood also is the best time to introduce your cat to tooth brushing. Start by rubbing your kitten’s mouth area, then place one finger between its lip and gums (sweeten the deal by dipping your finger in canned tuna or chicken water first). Every day, gently rub the gumline and teeth; praise your kitten while desensitizing it to this action. Stop immediately when the kitten has had enough — if not sooner — and feed a small treat. Be persistent and patient, and eventually, your kitten will allow full brushing. Brush gently in small circles on the outsides of the teeth to help keep plaque at bay.

Cats live much longer if they live indoors. Kittenhood is the time to get them used to dwelling indoors with access to a safe outdoor enclosure, or learning to walk on a leash. Liven up your kitty’s environment with exciting items such as toys, cat trees, perches, beds, tunnels and scratching posts. A bored cat is an unhealthy and unhappy cat. Give your kitten opportunities to jump, run, hide, pounce, sleep, play and be silly with a variety of toys and objects, such as paper bags, boxes, fishing toys and feathers. Plan on playing with your kitten for at least 10 to 15 minutes, twice a day.

Cats are extremely tactile beings with unique preferences for textures and toys. What does your kitten like? Noisy plastic balls? Fabric scratching posts? Furry, bite-sized mice? Cardboard scratchers? Polar fleece dens? Feathery wands? Experiment, be creative, and offer lots of alternatives. Stock up on favorite items, rotating them for fresh fun.

Litter also is a highly personal cat choice. Cats typically enjoy fine-grained, soft litters, but try several types to see which one your kitty prefers. A cat is less likely to use a litterbox furnished with a disapproved litter. Many varieties of dust-free litters are available that don’t have chemicals, fragrances or deodorizers.

While cleaning cat-related messes, use natural soap, baking soda, vinegar and plant-based cleaners.

Your veterinarian can guide you to make healthy choices for your kitten now and throughout its life.

Have fun with your oh-so-adorable kitten, and remember: The habits you start today will result in a lifetime of affection, health and wonderful memories.

Lisa Hanks is a freelance writer based in Newport Beach, Calif. As she writes each day, her three cats rotate lap duties to be sure she is never catless.