

Where Do Kittens Come From?

An experienced veterinarian describes and explains the courtship, mating rituals and pregnancy cycle of cats.

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The interval between the end of one heat cycle and the beginning of the next is typically every seven days, but can be anywhere from two days to three weeks. Susan Little, DVM, board-certified feline practitioner who practices at Bytown Cat Hospital in Ottawa, Canada, said that the length of the interval depends on the breed, season, social dynamics and whether or not an intact (non-neutered) male is present.

"Shorthairs generally cycle more frequently than longhairs and some pedigreed breeds, such as Persians, cycle less frequently than others such as Siamese," Little said. The frequency of heat cycles are also complicated by pseudopregnancy and "silent estrus." If a queen ovulates during a cycle, but does not conceive, she will have a pseudopregnancy lasting 35 to 45 days. This can look like infrequent cycling. With silent estrus, queens have all the normal hormonal events of estrus, but show no behavior indicative of being in heat. This typically happens to shy queens who are dominated by prevailing queens in a home, or to a queen housed alone with no exposure to an intact male.

About 20 percent of queens have a pre-heat, during which they make shrill, discordant caterwauling noises, rub up against anything and everything, roll, tread in place or claw themselves forward on the carpet while dragging slightly elevated hindquarters. Cat owners often mistake these antics for an indication of extreme pain. However, this feline break-dance is simply a way to attract a partner.

When a queen needs to attract a tom from a distance, she puts up the olfactory equivalent of billboard advertising. The female cat has scents called pheromones in her urine that indicate to suitors her fertility and location.

Anatomy of a TomToms reach puberty at about 6 months of age and fertility can last 14 years or more. You can identify an intact male cat by his thick neck and fleshy cheek jowls, which make him look like a prize fighter. His thick skin and muscles help him win battles with rival males.

The most important part of a tom's sexual anatomy is not easily visible. His serrated penis, which stimulates the lining of the queen's vaginal vault, triggers a reflex that releases eggs from her ovary for fertilization.

Even if a tom smells the queen's urinary cologne, hears her flirtatious voice and catches sight of her coquettish dance, he still approaches with the caution of a 7th-grade boy at a Sadie Hawkin's dance, and only mounts her after she approaches him. Although the stalking courtship may take hours, mating lasts from 1 to 4 minutes and actual penetration and ejaculation only takes a few seconds.