

Where Do Kittens Come From?

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

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When Cupid Shoots During copulation, the queen will scream and attempt to break free by turning and rolling like an alligator with dinner in its mouth, or strike at the tom with her claws. In what looks like a judo move, the tom grasps her by the neck with his teeth to prevent her from biting him.

After the breeding is complete, the tom runs off and the queen has what is called an "after reaction," where she'll roll or thrash around like a fish out of water and she cleans herself. This reaction may last up to 10 minutes.

The queen is typically ready to mate again in as little as five minutes or up to 30 minutes, and may allow up to 30 matings in a heat cycle with multiple toms. This increases the genetic diversity of the offspring. A single litter could produce offspring from a variety of fathers, but each individual kitten has only one father.

A pregnant queen remains physically active from conception to birth, a period of about two months. An experienced person can tell if a cat is pregnant by what feels like a string of pearls in the abdomen, starting at about day 16 of pregnancy. Some queens' nipples will enlarge and turn pink as early as day 18 of pregnancy. A veterinarian can use ultrasound to check the development and heart rate of the fetuses from day 26 to birth.

As birth approaches, the female retires to a secluded "birthing den," where she can give birth quietly and efficiently. For a mama cat, the operative word is "shhhh," as it's important in the wild to stay quiet and not alert predators. After giving birth, the queen eats all the evidence of the birth - the placenta, the kittens' urine and feces - in order to hide the evidence of the new family.

If you're a kitten, forget crying out for daddy. For one, toms usually don't participate in the parental care of the young. Also, in natural colonies, toms sometimes kill newborn kittens, but the females cooperate to protect the litter, even when it's not their own. Call it a feline neighborhood watch.