

Baby's First Checkup

Here's what you need to know for a stress-free and productive veterinary visit.

Susan Bertram, DVM

Using a systematic approach, either nose-to-tail or inside (internal organs) to out (eyes, ears, nose, skin), the veterinarian will check your kitten for any hereditary problems and signs of illness.

The salient features of a comprehensive physical exam include:
Eyes: Should be checked externally for discharge and redness. The vet should do more than just flip the lower eyelid down to look at the mucus membranes. The internal structures, such as the iris, lens and retina, should be examined using an ophthalmoscope.
Ears: Canals should be examined using an otoscope, as ear mites can only be detected with magnification or examination of ear debris under the microscope.
Nose: Checked for discharge, indicating a possible respiratory infection.
Mouth/throat: The mucus membranes should be pink but not too pale, and the bite checked for malocclusion (teeth meshing improperly, overbite or underbite), the tonsils examined for inflammation, and the tongue and the palate for viral ulcers or cleft deformity.
Lymph nodes: Located under the jaw, in front of the shoulder blades and back of the stifle joint (hind leg), they should be assessed for size and texture.
Chest: A stethoscope, preferably a pediatric one, must be used on multiple areas and both sides of kitten's chest to adequately assess lung and heart sounds. Otherwise, a heart murmur, which might be heard in a relatively focused area only on one side of the chest, could easily be missed. If the kitten is purring, it becomes more challenging to hear.

Abdomen: The kidneys, bladder and intestines will be felt, allowing the veterinarian to detect an abnormal fluid build-up (ascites), thickening of the intestines or abnormal size or shape of kidneys.
Genitals: The veterinarian should confirm the gender of your kitten for you. Don't laugh. Many owners are surprised to learn the kitten they thought was a "Thomas" is really a "Thomasina," and vice versa.