

## Tips for Kitten Season

**Springtime is prime breeding season for stray cats, but there are ways to help alleviate the situation.**

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Kittens should stay with their mothers until they are at least 8 weeks old. The mating season for cats, also known as “kitten season,” has arrived. From spring to fall, animal shelters are inundated with litters of new kittens.

Stray and feral cats, unless spayed or neutered through a Trap-Neuter-Return program, continue to expand their colonies. Alley Cat Allies, the national advocate for feral cats, offers advice on ways to help control the cat population, especially during the prime breeding season.

For people who find litters of kittens in their community, Alley Cat Allies suggests the following:

Determine the age of the kittens.

If kittens are not handled in the first weeks of their lives, they’re not socialized to humans, said Becky Robinson, Alley Cat Allies president. This makes them feral.

The following guidelines are useful for estimating the age of the kittens:

Under 1 week: Eyes are shut, ears are down, and they don’t walk. 1-2 weeks: Eyes start to open — they are blue — and ears begin to open. They crawl and knead. 3 weeks: Eyes and ears fully open. They respond to noises and movement and take their first steps. 4-6 weeks: Kittens run, play, dig and pounce. They are starting to wean, and eyes change from blue to their adult color. 8 weeks: Kittens look like small versions of adult cats. This is the best age at which to begin socialization.

Determine whether a mother cat is caring for the kittens.

“If the kittens are alone when you find them, they could be abandoned, or the mother could simply be looking for food,” Robinson said. She suggests observing them for an hour, depending on the kitten’s needs and a person’s time and resources.

If the mother cat doesn’t return, determine if the kittens are young enough to be socialized and fostered or adopted, or if they are old enough to be trapped, neutered, and returned using the age guideline above, Robinson said. If they are not weaned, they need bottle-feeding and round-the-clock care.

If the mother does return, keep in mind that her care is best for the kittens, and they should stay with her until they are 8 weeks. If she is friendly, trap her, pick up the kittens, and bring them indoors to a confined area until the kittens are adoptable.

If the mother is feral, leave the family outside and provide shelter, food and water. Once the kittens are weaned, put them in foster care for adoption. Be sure to spay the mother cat — so there are not future litters — and spay/neuter the kittens.

Practice TNR

“The best way to help stray and feral cats is Trap-Neuter-Return,” Robinson said. “The cats are humanely trapped and taken to a veterinary hospital or spay/neuter clinic to be vaccinated and neutered. Cats who are friendly toward humans and young kittens are put up for adoption through a foster program. Feral cats are ‘ear tipped’ — a portion of the left ear is clipped while they are under anesthesia — and then released to their original colony site.”