

Newcomers: Delivering That First Litter of Kittens Part I

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INTRODUCTION

That first litter of kittens can either be sheer joy or sheer TERROR depending on how well informed, prepared and supported you are. This first article will deal only with NORMAL birth and the supplies and help you might wish to collect before the birthing event. The more you understand NORMAL the more quickly you can spot ABNORMAL and appropriately get the help you need

With any luck at all you will have your mentor breeder or a breeder friend with you for that first litter. Just knowing you are not alone can do a lot for those nerves and even give one a sense of confidence. Notify your veterinarian when you have a litter due and leave information that may need to help with decision making should you need him/her by phone. The vet should know (A) the expected date of delivery (B) the number of the day after the first day of breeding that the queen goes into labor (C) history of C-section in the queens mother or sisters, if you know this (D) age (E) weight of queen at time of breeding and before delivery (F) is this a first litter or how many litters has she had (G) date of delivery of her last litter of kittens (H) any problems with the last litter?.

A system that might help is a 3X5 card system that may well save you time and trouble when your queen goes into labor. At the time of the breeding, fill out the 3X5 card with the name of the queen, sire, and the queens weight. Then figure 9 weeks (63 days) from the first day of breeding and that's your EARLIEST expected date of delivery. Also make note of when your breed NORMALLY delivers. Sixty-three to sixty-five days is a normal range but not all cats know this! Some breeds go "longer" and some right on day 63. There are breed variations and if you know this you (and your vet) will not be alarmed when the magic day 63 rolls by and there's no sign of labor.

EQUIPMENT

Hand towels

Birthing box with multiple layers of spread out hand towels (as each kitten is born, remove the soiled towel and the box is again clean and dry)

Iodine 3X5 cards or paper and pencil/pen

Q-tips watch

Scissors 1/4 ribbons in multiple colors

Scale Zip lock bags

Kitten delivery supplies can be put into a medium to large fishing tackle box and then everything is together when you need it. It also is rapidly available if you and your queen are going to be away from home at the time of the delivery. My husband often takes "his girls" to his office with him when they are due and one of us can't take the day off. He has a Tokyo cage at the office where the queen stays until she starts to deliver. A birthing box is then made from half of the carrier lined with layers of hand towels. With the supplies in his tackle box he can deliver kittens all day long! When it's time to come home, he puts the carrier back together, uses the Zip lock bags for soiled bedding, re-packs his tackle box and he's ready to go.

STAGES OF LABOR

Labor will be divided into three stages for the ease of description. In the cat, it isn't always possible to distinguish between stages and they generally go one into the other. Time between the phases varies depending on the queen and sometimes the same queen can have very different labors from one litter to another. That is the main reason for taking notes and keeping records. It's easy to forget details of a labor and delivery once it's over and you have 4 or 5 sweet little bouncing' kittens.

Stage 1: Involves the relaxation and dilation of the cervix and the fetus adopts normal birth posture and the uterine contractions continue.

According to multiple texts, the queens activity generally is reduced in the last week of pregnancy. It may also be noted that the body temperature of the queen may fall .5 to 1.0 degrees about 12 hours before the start labor and delivery. The body temperature, with rectal temperatures, often declines to 99F or lower by 12-36 before labor and delivery. (4) The kittens will "drop" about 12-24 hours before labor starts and this dropping is the result of a relaxation of the pelvic ligaments and the abdominal musculature. (1) Another sign of impending labor is that generally milk can be expressed from the mammary glands 24-48 hours before delivery. (4) During the first stage of labor, make a pot of coffee, get a good book or your knitting and prepare to spend some time with your cat. During Stage 1 your queen

may become restless and start to vocalize her discomfort. STAY CALM, if you become uptight she may well pick up on your tension. This first stage of labor may go 2-12 hours and if you know the signs you can calm her, support her and go about other tasks while checking on her.

Stage 2: Uterine contractions continue, the fetus enters the birth canal and the abdominal contractions start. During this stage of labor the kitten is born.

Once abdominal contractions start a kitten should be born in 5 to 60 minutes. In cats having their first litter it may take a bit longer so give her another 30 minutes or so. Be certain to note if the queen seems upset or otherwise in distress. This will help in the decision of time frames given before other methods are put into action. Rule of Thumb : 2 hours or more between kittens means there's usually a problem. Kittens are then usually born at 5-60 minute intervals until the litter is fully delivered. Great variation in the second stage of labor is seen and long pauses- sometimes lasting several hours- may occur, extending the birth process to 24 hours without loss of life. (1) This is where your observation and knowledge of your animal is vital. You best know when your queen seems distressed, anxious or exhausted.

Stage 3: During this stage, the placenta loses circulation and separates from the uterine wall. The uterine contractions continue and the placenta is expelled. (Always make a note of how many placentas are delivered. You should get one placenta for each kitten and if you don't the vet should be notified). Ideally a placenta is delivered after each kitten but since this is not an ideal world that is not how it always happens. Sometimes you will get 2 kittens and then 2 placentas or multiple kittens with the placentas delivering up to 2 hours after the last kitten is born. All placentas may be delivered at the same time after the delivery of the last kitten. (2) The queen may want to eat the placentas or you may wish to throw them away. In any event, keep count and make sure each kitten is matched with a placenta. IF NOT, check with your veterinarian and an exam and possibly drug induced uterine contraction may be deemed necessary. Again, treatment of this issue should be agreed on between you and your veterinarian. Retained placentas are usually described as causing fever, anorexia (decreased or absent appetite), depression and absence of nursing instincts in the queen. A majority of those that have evidence of a retained placenta remain healthy despite continued presence of this foreign material in the uterus. Some queens pass the membranes spontaneously several days later and others have been subsequently bred, queened healthy litters and passed the placenta during the subsequent delivery(3) Stage three of the birthing process also involves the return of the uterus to its pre-pregnancy state and the involution of the uterus is usually complete within 4-6 weeks.

There are mixed feelings about the queen eating the placentas. Some sources say the placenta is an excellent source of nutrition for the queen and in "the wild" offered the queen an excellent source of nutrition at a time when she could not leave her kittens. Other sources have eluded to the behavior as "protective" so predators would not smell fresh blood and come looking for the source. There is no evidence that this (the eating of the placenta) matters, but to avoid postpartum diarrhea if they are ingested the membranes should be gently removed from the queening box. (2) Since our queens are neither in "the wild" or generally having to "hunt" for their food it then becomes a matter of preference for the queen and the breeder. If you are breeding a breed where the AB blood typing is an issue, there is a way to obtain blood from the placenta and cord for testing if this needs doing.

Interference/Assistance With the Birthing Process

Once the kitten is born other tasks must be completed. The kitten must be removed from the sac (if present), the cord must be severed, and the kitten cleaned up. Later the kitten can be weighed and identified. Some kittens are born without a covering sac intact. If the sac is intact the queen will open the sac so the kitten can breathe. If she does not do this then pull open the membranous sac with your fingers. LET THE QUEEN DO ALL SHE WILL DO AND CAN DO FOR THE KITTEN. Some owners remove the kittens as soon as they are born so as to remove the fetal membranes, trim and/or tie the umbilical cord, and clean and dry the kitten. Such interventions should only be done if the queen neglects the kitten for the first 10 minutes following delivery. All of these activities are better done by the queen than the human observer. (4) Her licking and bonding with the kitten will be much more beneficial than most we humans can do. The kitten should be crying and vigorous. Inexperienced cats (and some experienced cats) may fail to sever the umbilical cords of their kittens, who may become entangled with each other's cords. (1) To sever the cord from the placenta, the queen may chew through the cord or you may cut the cord. When severing the umbilical cord it can be cut 1 to 1.5 inches from the belly of the kitten with clean scissors or some prefer to sever the cord by crushing and shredding it with thumb nails. If shredding the

cord, pull toward the kitten so as not to stress the abdominal wall and causing a hernia. Again the preference is yours. One issue with the queen chewing the cord is that she should not chew the cord too close to the kitten. Once the cord is severed then we recommend swabbing the cord with iodine. Some sources feel this decreases the risk of *S. canis* umbilical infections. To swab the cord dip an end of a Q-tip in the iodine and swab around the base of the cord from the center out toward the edge of the kitten. With another clean Q-tip surface, again dip in to the iodine and swab the cord from the body of the kitten out to the end of the cord. NEVER put a used Q-tip surface back into the iodine bottle as then the bottle is contaminated and should be thrown away. Use a clean Q-tip each time you make a swabbing of a part of the cord. Also, do not use the same Q-tip on another kitten.

Some breeders feel that queens need little if any help to deliver kittens while others wouldn't think of having their queens kitten without them present. I tend to err on the side of the conservative and feel humans should be at every birthing. It seems a real tragedy to lose a kitten or even your queen when it might have been prevented if you were there. This is not to say that the human should do all the work- actually we are more observers to intervene only if there is a problem or emergency. Actually it's very easy for me to do this because my husband delivers the kittens when he's available. I have delivered multiple litters but I do not enjoy the process like he does. His queens love him and I think they actually WAIT until he's home before they go into labor!

After the kittens are born and dry and settled then they should be weighed and identified. There are many ways to identify kittens and this method is only needed if you have multiple kittens of the same color. We use 1/4 inch ribbons of different colors so we can then follow their daily weights and as they grow we can see if certain kittens have certain personality traits. Just remember that if you use ribbons to check for tightness and change as necessary as the kittens grow.

Once the queen is done delivering her kittens, make certain her bedding is clean and dry, the room temperature is appropriate, the queen has food and water and a clean litter box.

The Newborn Kitten

That lovely newborn kitten is deaf and blind (eyes closed) and depends totally on a sense of smell and taste to find his dinner. While kittens are resilient they should be fed within 12 hours of birth. There is nothing more rewarding than watching a litter of newborn kittens all at their teats nursing contentedly.

At the end of the event, make certain you have adequate notes and data for future reference. Exact and detailed record keeping is a desirable trait for all breeders. These records may save you time, energy, money and trauma in later years.

I would also like to extend an invitation to other breeders to share their experiences on birthing with new breeders. Each of us have had many experiences and learned much in the process of delivering kittens over the years. Share your ideas.

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