Welcome Home, Kitten!

Congratulations on your new kitten! This guide covers what you need for a healthy, happy first year: preventive care, settling in, litter box and scratching habits, play, dental care, and the signs that mean it's time to call us. Our team and our cat-friendly exam rooms are here to make every visit as calm as possible for you and your kitten. Questions anytime? Call us at (805) 967-0121.

Your Kitten's First Year at a Glance

Most kittens visit us every 3 to 4 weeks until about 4 to 5 months of age, then again at 6 months and 1 year. Our doctors tailor vaccines and parasite prevention to your kitten's lifestyle, so your plan may differ slightly from this outline.

Age	What we typically do
First visit (often at 8 weeks)	Full exam, feline leukemia (FeLV) and FIV test, first FVRCP vaccine, deworming, fecal test, start monthly parasite prevention
Every 3–4 weeks until around 16 weeks old (typically at 12 weeks and 16 weeks)	FVRCP boosters, two-dose FeLV series, rabies vaccine at 16 weeks or older, deworming, fecal testing, +/- follow up kitten exam at 16 weeks old, weight and growth check, spay/neuter and microchip discussion
6 months	Spay/neuter
12-16 months	First adult wellness exam, vaccine boosters that are due, dental check

Core vaccines protect against feline panleukopenia, herpesvirus and calicivirus (FVRCP), and rabies. FeLV vaccination is strongly recommended for all kittens because young cats are most susceptible.

Year-round parasite control. The Companion Animal Parasite Council (CAPC) recommends deworming kittens every 2 weeks starting at 2 weeks of age until monthly broad-spectrum prevention begins, and at least four fecal tests in the first year (CAPC General Guidelines).

Microchip, spay and neuter. CAPC recommends permanent microchip identification and spaying or neutering every pet not intended for breeding. Ask us about the right timing for your kitten.

Feed a complete commercial or cooked diet, not raw. Raw diets and raw (unpasteurized) milk can carry parasites and infections, including bird flu (H5N1).

Bringing Your Kitten Home

Start small: one quiet room with everything your kitten needs makes a big new home far less overwhelming.

Before you leave. Rub a soft towel on the kitten's mother, littermates or bedding, and place it in the carrier. Familiar scent is comforting on the ride home and in the new space.

The safe room. Set up a quiet room with food, water, a litter box, a scratching post, toys, and a hiding spot or covered bed. Keep food and water away from the litter box. Open the carrier door and let your kitten come out on their own time. Use the same type of litter the kitten is used to, if you can.

Kitten-proofing. Remove string, ribbon, hair ties, rubber bands, small swallowable toys, ear pods, accessible electrical cords and many common house plants and flowers. Check for gaps behind appliances where a kitten could hide or get stuck.

Expanding territory. Once your kitten is eating, using the litter box and exploring confidently, open up the rest of the home one room at a time, with you nearby.

Introducing other pets

Most tension between household cats starts at the first introduction, so go slowly. The 2024 AAFP (now FelineVMA) Intercat Tension Guidelines recommend these steps (AAFP, 2024):

1. Keep the kitten in the safe room at first, with its own litter box, food, water and scratching post.
2. Swap scent before sight: rub a sock or cloth on one cat's cheeks and let the other sniff it. Swap bedding between rooms.
3. Let the cats see each other briefly through a cracked door, baby gate or screen, pairing the moment with treats or a meal.
4. Increase supervised time together gradually over days to weeks. Watch for staring, hissing or blocking, and step back a stage if you see them.
5. Give your resident cat extra one-on-one time, and keep separate feeding stations and resting spots for each cat.

Plan on at least one litter box per cat, plus one extra, in different locations. For dogs, keep the dog leashed during early meetings, and make sure the kitten has high perches and dog-free escape routes. Some cats become close friends, while others simply learn to share space peacefully. Both are normal outcomes.

Socialization, Handling and Gentle Training

Kind, consistent, reward-based handling now shapes how your cat feels about people, handling and new experiences for life.

Socialization. A kitten's most sensitive period for social learning is roughly 2 to 9 weeks of age (FelineVMA, 2025). Much of it happens before adoption, but kittens keep learning through their first months. Offer calm, positive introductions to gentle visitors, household sounds, the carrier and car, and being touched, always paired with treats or play. Let your kitten approach at their own pace.

Handling practice. Start with the touch your kitten enjoys, such as chin and cheek rubs. Then build up, a few seconds at a time, to touching paws, ears and mouth. Reward each step with a treat. This makes nail trims, tooth brushing, giving medication and vet exams much easier later.

Encouraging good manners:

- Reward the behavior you want (calm sitting, using the scratching post, gentle play) with treats, praise or play.
- Never use hands or feet as toys. Redirect play biting to a wand toy or a kicker toy.
- If play gets too rough, calmly stop and step away. Resume when your kitten is relaxed.
- Avoid physical punishment, yelling, spray bottles and loud startle noises. They create fear of people and can make biting, scratching and litter problems worse.

If behavior concerns arise, call us early. Problems are easier to solve before habits set in.

Litter Box Basics

Most kittens use a litter box naturally if it is clean, easy to reach and filled with litter they like.

- **How many:** at least one box per cat, plus one extra, in separate locations rather than side by side.
- **Size:** start with a low-sided box (or one with a ramp) for small kittens. As your cat grows, the box should be about 1.5 times their body length. Many cats prefer uncovered boxes.
- **Litter:** many cats prefer unscented, fine-grained clumping litter. Avoid scented litters and liners. If your kitten tries to eat litter, ask us about safer options.
- **Location:** quiet, private and easy to reach, away from food and water, noisy appliances, and dogs. Never somewhere your cat could get shut out.
- **Cleaning:** scoop at least once a day. Fully empty, wash with mild unscented soap and hot water, and refill on a regular schedule (weekly for non-clumping litter, every few weeks for clumping).

Helping your kitten learn. Place your kitten in the box after meals, naps and play, and reward them when they use it. Clean any accidents with an enzyme cleaner made for pet urine, so the scent doesn't draw them back. Cover houseplant soil with large decorative stones if your kitten digs in it.

Call us if your cat stops using the box. Urinating or defecating outside the box is often a sign of a medical problem such as a urinary tract issue, or of stress, conflict with another cat, or pain. Straining in the box with little or no urine, especially in a male cat, is an emergency.

Play, Enrichment and Scratching

Indoor living keeps cats safer, but safety alone isn't enough: indoor cats also need daily outlets for hunting, climbing, scratching and exploring. The FelineVMA's 2025 position statement on indoor cats lists five essential needs (FelineVMA, 2025):

1. A safe place to hide and rest.
2. Multiple, separated key resources: food, water, litter boxes, scratching areas, play and resting spots.
3. Opportunities for play and predatory behavior.
4. Positive, consistent, predictable human interaction.

5. An environment that respects the cat's sense of smell (avoid strong fragrances and harsh cleaners).

Play. Several short sessions a day work best, especially at dawn and dusk, when cats are naturally active. Use wand toys to let your kitten stalk, chase, pounce and finally "catch" the toy, then offer a small treat or meal. Rotate toys to keep them interesting. Put string, ribbon and wand toys away after play, since swallowed string can cause life-threatening intestinal blockages.

Food puzzles and climbing. Food puzzles and treat balls turn mealtime into a hunt. Cat trees, shelves and window perches give your kitten height, exercise and a view.

Catnip. About half of cats respond to catnip. It is safe and not addictive.

Scratching

Scratching is normal and necessary: it conditions claws, stretches muscles and leaves a scent and visual mark. The goal is to direct it, not stop it.

- Offer at least one tall, sturdy post your kitten can scratch at full stretch without it tipping. Many cats love sisal rope; some prefer horizontal cardboard scratchers. Try both.
- Place posts in prominent spots: near where your kitten sleeps and next to any furniture they target.
- Reward scratching on the post with treats and praise. A pheromone product such as Feliscratch by Feliway can help attract your kitten to the post.
- Make off-limits furniture less appealing with double-sided tape or a throw, while a good post sits right in front of it.
- Trim nails every few weeks. Ask our team to show you how. Soft nail caps are another option for some cats.

The FelineVMA strongly opposes declawing. With the right posts, training and nail care, it is not needed.

Carrier Training, Car Travel and Vet Visits

A cat who sees the carrier as a cozy hideout, not a sign of trouble, travels and visits us with far less stress. Kittenhood is the best time to teach this.

Choosing a carrier. Pick a sturdy carrier with a removable top as well as a front door. Lifting off the top lets your cat stay in the carrier for parts of the exam, and means no one has to pull or tip them out.

Carrier training at home:

1. Leave the carrier out in a favorite room, door open, with soft bedding inside.
2. Toss treats, toys or meals inside so your kitten goes in on their own.
3. Once your kitten is relaxed inside, close the door for a few seconds, then reward and open it. Gradually build up the time.
4. Open the door only when your kitten is calm, not while they are crying or scratching.
5. Take short, happy car rides that end back at home, not just trips to the vet.

Safe car travel. The FelineVMA recommends placing the carrier on the floor behind the driver's or passenger's seat and covering it with a light towel so your cat can hide. Use a seat belt only with a

crash-test-certified carrier, since a belt can crush other carriers (FelineVMA, 2025). Never let a cat ride loose in the car.

Extra help for anxious cats. Spraying a synthetic feline facial pheromone (Feliway Classic) inside the carrier about 15 minutes before travel may help some cats relax. If your cat still becomes very stressed during travel or visits, ask us about pre-visit anti-anxiety medication. We will help you choose the right option and suggest a trial dose at home first.

Fleas, Worms and Heartworm

Every cat, including indoor-only cats, needs parasite prevention every month, all year. CAPC recommends year-round broad-spectrum control that covers heartworm, intestinal worms, fleas and ticks (CAPC).

Heartworm: prevention is the only protection

Heartworm is spread by mosquitoes, which easily get indoors, and cases have been reported in the Santa Barbara area. In cats, even one or two worms can cause serious lung disease (heartworm-associated respiratory disease, often mistaken for asthma) or sudden death. There is no approved treatment to kill heartworms in cats.

The American Heartworm Society's 2024 feline guidelines recommend year-round heartworm prevention for all cats, indoor and outdoor, and routine heartworm screening (AHS, 2024). We will talk with you about testing at your kitten's wellness visits.

Products we recommend

All are prescription products except Capstar. Dosing depends on your cat's current weight, so we'll weigh your kitten before prescribing.

Product	Approved for	How often	What it covers
Revolution Plus (topical)	Kittens 8 weeks and older, 2.8 lb and up	Monthly	Fleas, several tick species, heartworm prevention, ear mites, roundworms, hookworms
Bravecto Plus Topical for Cats	Cats 6 months and older, 6.2 lb and up	Every 12 weeks	Fleas and black-legged ticks for 12 weeks; American dog ticks for 8 weeks. Does not intestinal worms
Capstar (oral tablet)	Kittens 4 weeks and older, 2 lb and up	As needed	Kills adult fleas fast, but only lasts about 24 hours. Not a stand-alone flea control
Credelio Cat (oral)	Kittens 8 weeks of age and older, 4.1 lb and up	Monthly	Fleas and deer tick. Does not treat intestinal worms.

Revolution Plus and Bravecto contain isoxazoline-class medications. Tell us if your cat has ever had a seizure or other neurologic problem.

Getting rid of fleas

- Treat every cat and dog in the home, every month, all year. Untreated pets keep the flea cycle going.
- Vacuum often, especially where your cat rests and jumps up and down, and empty the vacuum afterward.
- Wash pet bedding in hot water.
- Expect it to take about 3 months to clear an infestation, since new fleas keep hatching from eggs and pupae in the home.

Fleas can also give cats tapeworms when swallowed during grooming. If you see small, rice-like segments near your cat's tail or in the litter box, let us know.

Dental Care and Tooth Brushing

Dental disease is one of the most common health problems in cats, and it is painful. Periodontal disease is the most common oral condition in cats, with gum inflammation reported in up to 96% of cats in some studies (FelineVMA 2025 Oral Health and Dental Care Guidelines). Cats also commonly develop tooth resorption, a painful condition in which the tooth structure breaks down.

Signs to watch for: bad breath, red or bleeding gums, tartar, drooling, chewing on one side, dropping food, pawing at the mouth, or eating less.

What helps most:

- **Brushing**, ideally daily, is the most effective home care. Starting in kittenhood makes it much easier.
- **Dental diets, treats and chews** can help, especially for cats who won't accept brushing. Look for the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC) seal, which means the product has been tested to reduce plaque or tartar (vohc.org).
- **Oral exams** at every wellness visit, and professional cleaning under anesthesia when recommended. A full dental assessment, including dental X-rays, can't be done on an awake cat.

How to brush your kitten's teeth

1. Pick a calm time. Gently rub your kitten's cheeks and lips for a few seconds, then reward.
2. Let your kitten lick a little pet toothpaste off your finger. Never use human toothpaste.
3. Rub the paste along the outer surfaces of a few teeth with your finger or a soft cloth.
4. Switch to a soft pet toothbrush or finger brush. Brush the outer surfaces with small circular motions, a few teeth at first.
5. Work up gradually to about 30 seconds per side, including the big teeth at the back. The tongue takes care of most inner surfaces.

Keep every session short, upbeat and followed by a treat or play. Pet toothbrushes and toothpaste are available at our front desk, and the FelineVMA has step-by-step brushing videos for cat owners (catvets.com/dental).

Lifelong Wellness: Exams and Life Stages

Every cat needs a thorough exam at least once a year, and seniors every 6 months. Cats are experts at hiding illness, and they age much faster than we do, so a year between visits is a big slice of their life.

Life stage	Age	Exam schedule
Kitten	Birth to 1 year	Every 3–4 weeks during the vaccine series, then at 6 months and 1 year.
Young adult	1 to 6 years	At least yearly
Mature adult	7 to 10 years	At least yearly, often with screening bloodwork
Senior	Over 10 years	Every 6 months, with bloodwork, urine tests and blood pressure checks

At each wellness visit we:

- Ask about diet, behavior, litter box habits, lifestyle and any changes you've noticed.
- Do a nose-to-tail exam: eyes, ears, mouth and teeth, heart, lungs, skin and coat, abdomen, joints and lymph nodes. We also track weight and body condition.
- Check a fecal sample and review parasite prevention.
- Update vaccines based on your cat's lifestyle and risk.
- Recommend bloodwork, urine tests or blood pressure checks as your cat matures.

Even a cat who seems perfectly healthy can have early dental disease, weight gain, kidney changes or heart disease that only an exam or lab work will find.

Signs Your Cat May Be Sick

Don't wait if you think your cat is ill. Early treatment shortens recovery and can save a life. Kittens can become seriously ill within hours, so call sooner rather than later.

Call us right away

- Straining in the litter box with little or no urine (an emergency, especially in males)
- Trouble breathing, open-mouth breathing or panting
- Seizures, collapse or sudden weakness
- Bleeding from any part of the body, or blood in urine, stool or vomit
- Repeated vomiting or diarrhea, or a cat/kitten that stops eating
- Possible poisoning, including any contact with lilies (every part of the plant is toxic to cats), human medications or antifreeze. Be aware that many common house plants and flowers are toxic to cats (See ASPCA Toxic and Non-Toxic plant list https://www.aspca.org/pet-care/aspca-poison-control/toxic-and-non-toxic-plants
- String, thread or ribbon hanging from the mouth or rear. Do not pull it.
- Injury, a fall, or a sudden eye problem such as squinting or cloudiness

If we are closed or can't see your cat promptly, go to a 24-hour emergency hospital.

Call to schedule a visit

Cats often show illness through subtle changes. Let us know if you notice:

- **Litter box changes:** going outside the box, more or less urine, diarrhea or constipation
- **Appetite or thirst:** eating or drinking noticeably more or less
- **Weight:** unexplained loss or gain
- **Activity and sleep:** less playful, reluctant to jump, sleeping more, or unusually restless
- **Social behavior:** hiding, seeking less attention, or new irritability with people or pets
- **Grooming:** a greasy, matted or unkempt coat, bald patches, or over-grooming
- **Vocalizing:** more crying or howling than usual
- **Mouth:** bad breath, drooling or trouble chewing
- **Skin and ears:** frequent scratching, head shaking, or any new or growing lump
- **Eyes:** discharge, redness or squinting
- **Mobility:** limping or stiffness

Planning for Veterinary Costs

Preventive care lowers the risk of illness, but every cat eventually needs unexpected care. Today's veterinary medicine can offer much of the same diagnostics and treatment available to people, and a plan made now means cost won't be the only factor in a hard decision later.

Options many families use:

- A dedicated pet savings fund or monthly budget line
- Pet health insurance
- CareCredit or a credit card held in reserve
- Help from family or friends

Choosing pet insurance. Enrolling while your kitten is young and healthy avoids pre-existing condition exclusions. Before you buy, check:

- What's excluded: pre-existing conditions, and sometimes hereditary or breed-specific conditions
- Whether wellness care (vaccines, dental cleanings) is included or costs extra
- The deductible, co-pay and annual or lifetime limits
- How reimbursement is calculated: actual invoice versus a fee schedule
- That you can see any licensed veterinarian, including your regular one

- Pawlicy Advisor is a great resource to help you choose the right pet insurance company and plan for your cat or kitten: https://www.pawlicy.com/go/compare-pet-insurance

Trustworthy Resources

Online pet health information varies widely. Favor sites that say who wrote and reviewed the content, list veterinary credentials (DVM or VMD, board certification), show a recent review date, and aren't mainly selling a product. When in doubt, ask us.

- Catfriendly.com: cat care information from the Feline Veterinary Medical Association (FelineVMA, formerly the AAFP)

- American Heartworm Society: Heartworm in Cats
- Companion Animal Parasite Council (CAPC)
- Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC): dental products tested to reduce plaque and tartar

Sources

- CAPC General Guidelines for Dogs and Cats, updated April 2025
- American Heartworm Society Feline Heartworm Guidelines, revised 2024
- 2025 FelineVMA Feline Oral Health and Dental Care Guidelines
- 2024 AAFP Intercat Tension Guidelines
- FelineVMA 2025 Position Statement: Meeting the Physical and Emotional Needs of Indoor Cats
- FelineVMA 2025 Position Statement: Socialization of Feral Kittens
- FelineVMA 2025 Position Statement: Transportation of Cats in Motor Vehicles
- Bravecto Topical Solution for Cats, product information (Merck Animal Health)
- Revolution Plus for Cats, FDA approval summary
- Capstar (nitenpyram) Tablets, FDA approval summary
- https://www.pawlicy.com/go/compare-pet-insurance help with choosing a pet insurance company and plan that is right for you and your kitten or cat.
- https://www.aspca.org/pet-care/aspca-poison-control/toxic-and-non-toxic-plants