

NORMAL LABOR AND DELIVERY IN THE CAT

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BE PREPARED

Pregnancy and giving birth can be a frightening, confusing and painful experience for both you and your cat. However, understanding proper pregnancy care can help make the process go more smoothly and help you know what is normal. It can also help you to determine when it is time to get the veterinarian involved.

GESTATION

Many people consider the time from breeding to delivery to be gestation but this is not completely accurate. The true definition of gestation is the time from conception to delivery. In the queen, a female cat, gestation is 63 days. Knowing the exact time of conception, however, is difficult since a queen can be receptive to the male before and after ovulation. For this reason, the time from breeding to delivery is usually somewhere between 58 to 70 days. Your veterinarian can help narrow this time frame by examining the cells of the vaginal wall.

Be aware that because your queen bred, this does not mean she is pregnant. For confirmation of pregnancy, an examination, with ultrasound and possibly x-rays by your veterinarian is suggested.

NUTRITION

Once pregnancy is confirmed, proper care of the mother-to-be is very important. Before breeding, make sure she is up to date on all her vaccinations. It is not recommended to vaccinate your cat during pregnancy. Also, make sure she is dewormed and tests negative for feline leukemia and feline immunodeficiency virus.

After breeding and conception, the nutritional demands of the mother increase. This need for more increased calories and increased food continues throughout pregnancy and nursing. At the time of breeding, begin slowly changing the queen's diet to a growth formula or a pregnancy and lactation diet. Continue this diet throughout the remainder of pregnancy and until the kittens are weaned. Vitamins or other supplements are not recommended nor needed. With a proper diet, your cat will receive the proper amount of nutrients. Excessive amounts can actually result in birth defects.

PREPARING FOR DELIVERY

As the time of delivery approaches, you may want to make a queening box to provide a safe, clean and comfortable area for your cat to deliver. Queening boxes should be easily accessed by the mother but escape-proof for the new arrivals. You can use wood, Formica or any easily cleaned building material. Some people use small plastic children's wading pools. Whichever type of box you choose, make sure it is large enough for the queen to stretch out comfortably. Make sure the sides are just low enough for the mother to step over and place the box in a warm, dry, draft-free area. If possible, try to choose a quiet and secluded area. Initially, place newspapers on the bottom of the box for easy clean up.

Once all the kittens are born, place blankets or towels to provide some footing for the kittens. Be aware that you must get the queen used to the queening box before the birth. If not, she may make her own decision on where to have the kittens – and this may be a closet, a pile of fresh clean laundry or even in the middle of your bed.

An additional suggestion is to have your cat examined by a veterinarian toward the end of pregnancy. A thorough physical exam, along with ultrasound or x-rays can help determine how many kittens you can expect. This way, you will know when she is done delivering and not just in another resting phase between kittens.

LABOR AND DELIVERY

As the time of delivery approaches, twice daily monitoring of the queen's body temperature will help alert you to the impending birth. About 24 hours before the beginning of labor, there will be a temporary drop in the body temperature. Normal temperature is 101 to 102.5. Twenty-four hours prior to labor, the temperature can drop to 98 to 99 degrees.

LABOR STAGE I

After the temperature drop, stage I labor begins. This is the time when the queen becomes restless and anxious. You may notice panting, pacing, refusal of food and maybe vomiting. Nesting behavior begins. This is the time to place her in the queening box (hopefully she is already accustomed to the box). After getting settled in the queening box, you may notice her dragging clothing or fabric to the area to form a comfortable bed. You may want to remove any clothing as queening begins or these pieces of clothing may be permanently stained.

This stage of labor typically lasts 6 to 12 hours. At the end of stage I, the cervix is completely dilated. If your cat has not started queening within 24 hours after starting stage I labor, veterinary assistance is recommended.

LABOR STAGE II

Stage II labor is defined as the part of labor when the kitten is delivered. Visible contractions begin. The abdomen tenses and the queen begins straining. This action will appear similar to the queen trying to have a bowel movement.

The first kitten should be delivered within 1 to 2 hours of the onset of contractions and straining. Veterinary assistance is strongly encouraged if the first kitten is not delivered within 2 hours after the onset of contractions.

After delivery of the kitten, the queen may enter a resting phase that can last up to 4 hours but typically only lasts about 30 minutes. Active straining will begin again and more kittens will be delivered. If you know there are additional kittens yet to be born and the resting period is longer than 4 hours, veterinary assistance is necessary. This resting phase may not occur after each delivery. Sometimes, several kittens may be born rapidly.

LABOR STAGE III

After delivery of a kitten, the queen may enter stage III labor. This is the time when the placenta, or afterbirth, is delivered and usually occurs 5-15 minutes after delivery of the kitten. If multiple kittens are born rapidly, several placentas may be expelled together. After the passage of the placenta, the queen will return to stage II labor. She may continue the resting phase or begin contracting. Throughout queening, the queen will fluctuate between stage II and stage III labor until all the kittens are born. It is very important to keep track of the number of placentas. There should be the same number of placentas as kittens. If a placenta is retained in the uterus, the queen will eventually become quite ill.

QUEENING

As soon as the kitten is born, the mother should immediately start cleaning the kitten. She should lick the kitten vigorously, remove him from the amniotic sac if it is still present, and chew the umbilical cord. She may even ingest the placenta. This is not necessary and, sometimes, can lead to vomiting and diarrhea. Prompt removal of the placentas can get them out of the way and help you keep track of how many placentas she has passed.

Those kittens that are born still in the sack need immediate help. If the mother does not open the sack and begin

cleaning the kitten, it is up to you to help. Tear the membrane of the sack and begin cleaning and rubbing the kitten with a clean dry towel. You may have to clean other kittens if the mother is not showing much interest in her newborns. Tie off the umbilical cord about 1 inch from the belly wall using string, thread or dental floss. Cut the cord off on the other side of the tie. Clean and rub the kitten vigorously until you hear crying. Place the kitten back with the new mom and make sure she allows her kittens to nurse.

Being prepared to assist and understanding newborn kitten care is essential to help the mother and her babies through these first steps of life.