



Milton Animal Hospital

Caring for Puppies and Kittens

No two ways about it, puppies and kittens are adorable. It's easy to be transfixed by the tiny paws, tiny noses, and big bellies galloping around your home in a riot of excitement. Puppy- and kittenhood—the first six months of life—can be one of the best times in a pet's life, but it requires some diligence and special care from loving pet owners.

First off, if you're in the market for a new pet, be sure you allow him enough time with his mother and his littermates to be healthy and well socialized. Young animals should be adopted when they're ready to be socialized—somewhere between 10 and 16 weeks for kittens and 7 to 10 weeks for puppies. Once you get them home, and have picked up the litter, collar, leash, pet bed, and everything else you need, you can start to be a wonderful pet parent.

A Trip to the Doctor

The first thing you should do with your new kitten or puppy is make an appointment to see a veterinarian. Young animals, whose immune systems are not yet running at full force, are more vulnerable to parasites like fleas and worms as well as respiratory infections and other conditions. Your veterinarian will record your pet's weight, perform a physical exam, and possibly do a fecal exam or a blood test, in order to rule out parasites or other potential problems. There are several conditions, such as orthopedic problems, that can be effectively treated if they are caught when animals are young, so seeing a veterinarian early is vital.

It's also important that your little pet sees the veterinarian because he needs to be immunized. Puppies and kittens are initially immune to many diseases because of the antibodies they receive from their mothers' milk. After weaning, however, they need to receive a series of vaccines in order to develop immunity on their own. Vaccinations for kittens generally include rabies and a "combination" vaccine for feline distemper and respiratory illness, and can also include feline leukemia, depending on where the pet lives and whether or not he goes outdoors. Puppies receive more vaccines usually distemper, hepatitis, leptospirosis, parainfluenza, parvovirus, rabies, and sometimes bordetella. If you've adopted your puppy or kitten from a humane society or a reputable breeder, he has probably already had his initial vaccinations. He needs to continue to be vaccinated every three to four weeks, however, until he is five or six months old. After this point, you and your veterinarian can discuss how often he will need booster shots.

Kitten- and Puppy-Proofing Your Home

One of the most important things you can do for your kitten or puppy is give him a safe environment to live, play, and explore in. You can think of young cats and dogs much like you think of toddlers: they're not entirely stable on their feet, they'll put almost anything in their mouths, and they're curious enough to get into just about everything. With that in mind, you can take a few of these precautions to keep your home safe for your little pet.

- Keep toxic and dangerous materials, such as cleaning solutions, antifreeze, and medications, in a locked cabinet or in a room your pet doesn't have access to. Don't trust an unlocked cabinet near the ground—Inquisitive kittens and pups have been known to paw doors open.
- Patrol your house with an eye out for small holes or gaps in floorboards, walls, baseboards, heating vents, and anywhere else a small animal could squeeze into and get stuck. While you're at it, look over your furniture for potential hazards. Kittens in particular can squeeze into holes underneath box spring mattresses and upholstered chairs, and they can be trapped in the mechanism underneath a reclining chair.
- Try to remove everything in sight that is small enough to be chewed or swallowed, including paper clips, coins, rubber bands, staples, pen caps, thread, dental floss, earrings, needles, and thumbtacks. Puppies from the larger breeds might even be able to swallow something as large as a pen, a rock, or a piece of silverware. Objects like these can choke animals if swallowed, or they could do a lot of damage to the digestive system.
- Until your little one becomes very stable on his feet, you may want to block off stairs and ledges with a baby gate or a wide piece of plywood. Remember, puppies and kittens can jump surprisingly high, so you'll want to use a tall gate.
- Both dogs and cats tend to think that the toilet is their own private water fountain. Small pets can fall in and injure or drown themselves when they try to drink, and automatic toilet bowl cleaners can be harmful or even fatal if drunk in large amounts or by a young animal. Keeping the toilet lid shut should ward off problems.
- Watch out for heavy or fragile objects placed on unstable bases. A carousing puppy could accidentally knock over a lamp on an end table, for example. An iron sitting on an ironing board could also be easily toppled.
- Young animals have the instinct to chew, so you may want to cover electric cords with rugs or plastic cord guards, which are available at hardware stores.
- Some of the prettiest plants inside your house or in your yard may be poisonous to your pet. Keep azalea, daffodil, rhododendron, oleander, mistletoe, hydrangea, morning glory, diffenbachia, sago palm, Easter lily, and yew plants out of your kitten or pup's reach, as they can all be harmful or even fatal to animals.
- Young animals need a safe haven to stay in when they can't be supervised. You can confine them to a crate or take one room of the house and make it into your pet's home for when you're gone. It should include a soft, warm place to sleep and plenty of toys, and it should be regularly examined for the hazards listed above.

Feeding

If it seems like your little guy is ravenous on a regular basis, it's because he is. Young animals develop at an amazing rate, and they need a lot of calories and fat, protein, and vitamins to fuel their growth. Just after weaning (at somewhere between 4 and 6 weeks old), puppies and kittens need about twice the energy of an adult dog of the same size. This need gradually decreases until they reach adulthood.

Because of these high energy needs, you should feed your pet a high quality puppy or kitten food. Stay away from foods labeled "maintenance" or "adults only" — they don't contain a high enough percentage of fat and protein to meet a juvenile's needs. You can begin by setting out the amount of food recommended by the manufacturer. Keep an eye on your young animal's weight. If he seems to be getting thin, you can feed him more. Most cats and dogs won't become overweight during their first six months — they're growing too fast — but it's possible, so you can watch out for weight gain. Starting at about six months, or a little later for cats, you can start mixing the puppy or kitten food with an adult food.

Grooming

With a young animal, you have a great opportunity to make grooming into a pleasant experience for both of you. Cats and dogs don't automatically hate nail clipping, ear cleaning, and baths — they're just nervous and unused to being handled that way. It's only after a negative experience, like being held down or punished for struggling, that they begin to associate grooming with discomfort. You can avoid this negative association by starting when your pet is young and allowing him to adjust gradually to the grooming process. You can make grooming fun, with lots of petting, praise, and treats. Eventually, the time you spend brushing, washing, and handling your pet may become enjoyable to both of you, allowing you to bond in a relaxed atmosphere.

- **Handling** — You can start getting your kitten or puppy used to being touched as soon as you bring him home. When he's calm and relaxed, try looking in his ears while you pet him. If he becomes nervous or uncomfortable, stop until he calms down. You can also gently play with his paws, first by gently touching them, then by picking them up and massaging the pads. Get him used to having his stomach touched (which is particularly important for cats), his armpits and groin examined, and his mouth opened and his teeth touched. This will not only help your pet see this kind of touching as soothing and nonthreatening, but it will also let you check for parasites, unusual lumps under the skin, and other health problems. You should start with short sessions — about two or three minutes — as puppies and kittens have short attention spans and will quickly become antsy. You can build to longer sessions as your pet gets older.
- **Brushing** — This is one of the easiest parts of grooming for a young pet to get used to. He may initially be a bit frightened of the brush, so you can start by simply showing him the brush, letting him sniff it, and giving him praise and a treat. Next, you can run the flat side of the brush along his body, letting him adjust to the rhythm and motion of brushing. When you switch to the bristled side of the brush, brush often enough that you don't have to pull through mats or tangles, so the experience will be pain free.
- **Ear cleaning** — Most animals aren't wild about having their ears cleaned, so try to be patient and give your little pet a lot of encouragement. You can start by just touching the outer rim of the ear, using a cotton ball and ear cleaning solution from your veterinarian.
- **Trimming toenails** — Puppies and kittens can grow sharp little claws very quickly, and they may need to be trimmed as often as once a week for the first few months of life. This can be a challenge with young cats and dogs, because their nails are small and it's difficult to see the quick, which supplies blood to the nail. Start by only snipping off the very tip of the nail. As you and your pet become more comfortable, you can start to snip the nail away in thin cross-sections, checking each layer until you see a dark area in the center, which signals the beginning of the quick.

Once you bring your little one through his first months safely, you can be proud of your accomplishment as a pet parent. Though it can take a lot of work, raising a well-fed, well-groomed, and happy puppy or kitten is a big step toward having a well-fed, well-groomed, and healthy adult pet.