



FAQ: Cat Reproduction

At what age do female cats first go in to heat?

Female cats typically reach sexual maturity when they are about 4.5 – 7.0 lb (2.3-3.2 kg), or between five and nine months of age. However, it is possible for female kittens as young as four months to go into heat and become pregnant! In addition, domestic shorthair and longhair cats may reach sexual maturity earlier than purebred cats, and free-roaming cats may become sexually mature sooner than cats kept indoors.

How long do they stay in heat?

The duration of estrus (heat) varies in individual cats. Heat lasts an average of seven days, but may be as long as 21 days. If a female cat doesn't mate and become pregnant, she may go back into heat repeatedly, with only brief periods of non-heat – as little as two days – between heats!

At what age can they become pregnant?

A female cat can become pregnant as soon as she is sexually mature – as early as four months of age.

During what times of the year can a female cat get pregnant?

While breeding and pregnancy occur most commonly in the spring, female cats can become pregnant at any time during the year, especially in mild climates.

What is the gestation period for a pregnant cat?

56 to 71 days. The average length is 67 days.

How many litters can a female cat have in a year?

Up to five litters in one year!

What is the average number of kittens born in a litter?

For free-roaming cats, the average number of kittens per litter is probably around three, but it can commonly be up to six or more.

Can cats become pregnant while they are nursing kittens?

Yes, absolutely! It is typical for cats to go back into heat one to two months after giving birth to kittens, and they can easily become pregnant at this time! Some cats may go into heat and become pregnant again as soon as one week after having a litter!

Can cats be spayed if they are nursing kittens?

Yes. A cat who is spayed while she is nursing will continue to produce adequate milk for

her kittens. Some veterinarians prefer to wait until a cat has weaned her kittens before doing the surgery because the mammary gland (breast) development present during nursing can make the surgery slightly more difficult.

If the cat can be kept indoors away from any possible exposure to intact male cats, it is okay to wait until the kittens are weaned before spaying the mother (in fact, the whole family could be spayed or neutered at this time). If the cat cannot be kept away from intact male cats while nursing, she should be spayed as soon as possible. Return her to her kittens as quickly as possible after surgery.

If the nursing cat is feral and must be trapped, it is recommended that you also catch the kittens (if possible), or wait until the kittens are at least six weeks old, to avoid leaving young kittens without their mother for too long.

At what age do unspayed female cats stop giving birth to kittens?

Unlike humans, cats do not go through “menopause.” While fertility may gradually decline over time, there is no age after which a female cat can no longer become pregnant.

Can cats from the same litter mate with each other and produce litters?

Yes. For this reason, male and female littermates who are housed together must be neutered and spayed by four months of age!

Should I allow my female cat to have one litter before spaying her?

No! There is absolutely no benefit to the cat in doing this. Spaying a cat before her first litter, or better yet, before her first heat, is easier and safer. Recent evidence also suggests that spaying a cat before six months significantly decreases her risk of mammary (breast) cancer.

If my cat is pregnant, can she be spayed?

Yes. Spaying a cat during pregnancy is slightly more difficult than spaying a non-pregnant cat, but is better than allowing unwanted kittens to be born and to contribute to the cat overpopulation problem.

Is there a cat/kitten overpopulation problem in Sacramento?

Yes. Every year, as many as 11,608 cats are euthanized in Sacramento-area shelters because there aren't enough homes for them. Spaying or neutering your cat will help reduce this tragedy!

Spayed and neutered cats are less expensive to license. Find out how much money you can save by altering your pet at www.sspca.org/Vaccination.html

Compiled by Barb Jones, DVM

Sources:

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Plaszynka M. *Compendium of animal reproduction*. 7th ed: Intervet International, 2002.