

Pregnancy in Cats

- In cats, pregnancy lasts for 56 to 79 days, or approximately 9 weeks.
- Pregnancy is determined by feeling (palpating) the developing kittens in the abdomen or by radiography (x-ray) and/or ultrasonography (ultrasound).
- Pregnant cats should be fed a well-balanced commercial diet and should have access to fresh water at all times.

What Is Pregnancy?

Pregnancy is the time before birth when kittens develop inside the mother's uterus. Unlike canine fertility, feline fertility is influenced by the amount of time that the female is exposed to sunlight. As a result, pregnancy in cats tends to be seasonal, with most births occurring from spring through early fall.

Developing kittens usually have claws, eyes, and ears by the fifth week of pregnancy and full body hair by the eighth week. After 56 to 79 days, or about 9 weeks, the litter is born. Litter size can range from a single kitten to as many as 10 or more. In outdoor and feral cats, it is common for kittens in the same litter to be sired by different toms, or fathers.

What Are the Signs of Pregnancy?

During the first few weeks of pregnancy, there are very few signs. By the third week of pregnancy, the mother's nipples become more prominent and pink, a condition called *pinkening up*. By the fourth and fifth weeks, you may notice weight gain, especially around the abdomen. Toward the end of pregnancy, the breasts, or mammary glands, enlarge, and you may see a milky discharge from the nipples a day or two before birth.

How Is Pregnancy Determined?

Many veterinarians can identify pregnancy by palpating, or feeling, the abdomen with their hands as early as the third to fourth week of pregnancy. Ultrasonography, if available at the practice, may be

used to identify fetal heartbeats around the third week of pregnancy. During the sixth week, radiographs (x-rays) can detect bones and give the most accurate estimate of litter size.

Nutrition and Exercise

Pregnant cats should be fed a well-balanced commercial diet and should have access to fresh water at all times. As the pregnancy progresses, your veterinarian can counsel you on increasing food intake or may recommend another diet that is higher in protein and calories. Supplements should not be given without consulting your veterinarian first.

As the developing kittens take up more space in the abdomen and press against the stomach, you may need to feed your cat smaller, more frequent meals. Cats often require even more food during nursing, when they can consume up to twice as much food as normal.

While exercise helps the mother maintain muscle tone, keeping pregnant cats indoors is generally a good idea. Certain viruses and parasites can be particularly harmful to developing kittens. For example, if your cat has not been vaccinated for panleukopenia (feline distemper), exposure to an infected cat can harm the mother, resulting in serious developmental brain disorders in the kittens. Keeping your pregnant cat indoors also prevents her from delivering the litter outdoors, where there are numerous dangers to kittens, including temperature extremes and predators.

Prenatal Exams

Your veterinarian can examine your cat and determine whether she is pregnant. If possible, vaccines and medications should be avoided during pregnancy because of potential harm to the mother and developing kittens. If you are concerned about parasites, including fleas, consult your veterinarian. He or she can advise you on which products are safe for use in pregnant cats.