Reproductive Problems in Cats

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Reproductive problems in cats range from infertility, to abortion, to difficult deliveries.

Infertility

A common reason for a queen not to become pregnant is poor breeding management. She needs to allow the male to mate with her before she will ovulate. Ideal is for 3-4 breedings a day every 1-2 days as long as she is receptive. Some cats will take a dislike to another and not mate with them. If either the male or female refuses to mate with a particular cat, try another partner. Queens will allow more than one male to mate with them in one heat cycle resulting in one litter of kittens with more than one sire.

The male may have a decreased sperm count, poor sperm morphology (structure), or poor sperm motility. These may be genetic problems or due to injury or illness. Collecting a semen sample from the male and having it analyzed should be an early step in determining the problem. Infections such as feline leukemia are capable of causing sterility.

Underweight or overweight queens tend to have more problems conceiving. Feeding of too little or poor quality food may affect pregnancies. Problems such as poor timing of breeding are usually easy to fix. Other problems are more difficult. Reproductive specialists are available at the veterinary teaching hospitals for assistance if needed. Infertility problems that the tom or the queen have may be passed genetically to the offspring and the trait carried on to future generations.

Abortion

Spontaneous abortion and/or resorption occurs. The frequency is unknown, as no reliable tests are available to detect pregnancies early. Any vaginal bleeding seen during the second to eighth week of pregnancy is abnormal. Other symptoms include fever, lack of appetite, depression, or expulsion of the fetuses. The queen may eat all the evidence before it is ever discovered. Infections such as rhinotracheitis, panleukopenia, or feline leukemia may cause it. Fetal defects, poor nutrition, trauma, abnormalities of the reproductive system, and change of environment can also cause fetal loss. Very few treatments are available. Keep her quiet, confined, and away from other animals. If a miscarriage is suspected, she should be examined by a veterinarian to check for retained fetuses or placentas which may cause infection.

Dystocia: Difficult labor and delivery

Domestic short hair and domestic long hair cats tend to deliver their kittens very easily. This is probably due to genetics and natural selection due to lack of advanced veterinary care such as c-sections. In other breeds which are selected for specific structural features such as wide faces or shoulders, delivery may not be as easy. In addition, overweight queens may have more difficult deliveries. Suspect dystocia if she has had 30-60 minutes of hard contractions and no kitten has arrived, weak and infrequent contractions, weakness, or excessive or abnormal vaginal hemorrhaging or discharge. Your veterinarian will want to take x-rays to determine the number, size, and position of kittens that remain. A cesarean section may be necessary to save the queen and hopefully the kittens.

Eclampsia

Eclampsia is an acute, life-threatening disease caused by a decrease in the amount of calcium in the bloodstream. It is not commonly seen in cats. It occurs in early lactation, or rarely, in late pregnancy. It occurs due to the loss of the calcium from milk production, poor uptake of calcium by the intestines, or poor nutrition. Symptoms include a change in behavior, restlessness, nervousness, panting, pacing, decrease in maternal instincts, and tetany. (Symptoms of tetany include irritability, drooling, stiffness in gait, loss of coordination, and pain on walking.) Eclampsia may progress within minutes to hours to muscle spasms, inability to stand, fever, increase in heart rate, and seizure-like activity without loss of consciousness. Death may result from respiratory depression or hyperthermia (increase in body temperature) resulting in cerebral edema. Diagnosis is made by symptoms, the timing with the pregnancy/lactation, and calcium levels in the blood. Treatment should be sought immediately. It is treated by supplying calcium directly into the vein while monitoring for heart rate or rhythm abnormalities and temperature changes. Oral supplements are started after the initial episode is over and the kittens are supplemented with bottle feeding and started on solid food as soon as possible.

Mastitis - infection of the mammary glands

Mastitis is an inflammation and infection of the mammary glands. If it is localized to one gland, the queen may show no signs of illness. If it spreads throughout the mammary gland, she may show signs of illness. The mammary glands should be checked daily for signs of warmth, pain, or hardness. Milk from each nipple needs to be checked daily for color and consistency. Milk from glands with mastitis may be off-color and clumping. She may have a fever and refuse to allow the kittens to nurse. Diagnosis is made by physical exam. Treatment depends on the severity of the condition and may include antibiotics, hot packing the affected glands, and milking out the affected glands. Kittens can continue to nurse from the

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affected gland if the milk remains normal.

Vaginal discharges and uterine infections

Metritis is an infection and inflammation that occurs in the uterus. Symptoms generally show up 12-96 hours postpartum. They include an off-color foul smelling vaginal discharge, depression, listlessness, lack of appetite, increased/normal/decreased temperature, and lack of caring for the kittens. Diagnosis is confirmed through bloodwork and x-rays. (X-rays are done to make sure no fetuses have been retained.) Treatment includes fluids, antibiotics, and possibly a spay surgery if the queen is healthy enough to make it through surgery.

A pyometra is an infection in the uterus that tends to occur after heat cycles where the queen does not become pregnant. Symptoms include vomiting, listlessness, and an increase in drinking. If the cervix is open, a discharge from the vagina is seen. If the cervix is closed, no discharge is seen. Diagnosis is based on physical exam, blood work, and x-rays. The ideal treatment is to perform an ovariohysterectomy (spay).

Subinvolution of placental sites occurs when the uterus does not fully repair itself after delivery. This results in a vaginal discharge beyond the normal three weeks postpartum. Treatment is usually unnecessary, as the queen is healthy and able to become pregnant again.

Uterine prolapse

Uterine prolapse occurs when the uterus is pushed out of the body through the vagina. Treatment consists of manual replacement of the uterus or an ovariohysterectomy.

Retained placenta

Retained placentas are rarely a problem. When it does occur, symptoms include fever, lack of appetite, depression, and a decrease in nursing and caring for kittens.

Lack of maternal instinct

A lack of maternal instinct to care for the kittens is usually due to environmental disturbances. It may also be due to genetics, the amount of maternal drive the queen's dam showed for her offspring, or illness. Some first time moms will need several days to find out what their role is and need assistance from the owner to figure it out.

After the delivery, the queen may experience minor temperament changes, but should not be vicious. If poor temperament is a problem, that line of cats should not be used for breeding. Cannibalism of kittens usually involves inexperienced queens, those with nervous temperaments, or older queens. These queens and their relatives should be removed from the breeding program.

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