Queening (Giving Birth) in Cats

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Giving birth in cats is called 'queening.' As the delivery date approaches, preparations should be made 10-14 days ahead of time, and the necessary supplies should be collected and placed together.

A place to deliver

The queen should be given a box (cardboard box, laundry basket, etc.) in which she can have her kittens. It should be easy to clean and lined with soft blankets. Do not use material that kittens could get caught or lost in such as small or torn blankets or shredded paper. Allow her one to two weeks before her due date to become comfortable with the area you have decided to use for the delivery. It should be clean, dry, darkened, and quiet. Do not allow people or other pets to disturb her while she is in the delivery area.

During delivery, newspapers may be used to line the box with new ones added as they become wet. Once she is finished, the entire box is cleaned and lined with clean papers and a blanket. Do not use strong smelling cleaners in the delivery area, as the mother and offspring identify each other by smell. Do not allow the queen to have the kittens in the litter box, as that increases the likelihood of disease. Privacy, cleanliness, dryness, and warmth are needed for an ideal queening location.

Supplies

A second box to place kittens into during sibling births may be necessary. This protects the new kittens, if the queen is moving a lot. A heating pad should be placed on the bottom with a fleece pad over it. The kittens should NEVER be placed directly on heating pads as they may be burned. Another 1-2 towels should be placed over the top of the basket to keep the heat in. The fleece and the air in the basket should feel comfortably warm to your hand. If the kittens are moving around and crying, they are too cold or too hot. If they are bobbing their heads, searching, and crying, they are hungry. They should be put with mom as soon as possible to nurse. The kittens can be placed with the queen between births to allow them to nurse and bond, and if necessary, be put back in the basket while the next sibling arrives.

A stack of soft, clean towels should be handy to help clean off kittens, if necessary. White or light colored towels will show the color of any discharge or placenta. Have a laundry basket handy to throw the towels in as they are used. Wash as soon after birth as possible with detergent and bleach to minimize staining of the towels. Paper towels work well to dry the kittens and reduce the need for doing laundry afterward.

Other supplies to have on hand include the following:

1. Sterile hemostats and blunt-end scissors to cut the umbilical cord if necessary
2. Alcohol and matches to sterilize the hemostats and scissors
3. Heavy sewing thread, dental floss, or suture to tie umbilical cords if necessary
4. Lubricating (petroleum) jelly
5. Several pairs of sterile surgical gloves
6. Rubber pediatric bulb syringe
7. Surgical antiseptic scrub/iodine
8. Tube feeder, syringe, bottle and nipple, and kitten milk replacer such as KMR
9. Gram scale to weigh newborns
10. Stethoscope
11. Nail polish to mark kittens for identification if necessary
12. Thermometer - rectal to monitor the queen's temperature
13. Household thermometer to monitor the air temperature in the box
14. High-quality kitten food, yogurt, and/or vanilla ice cream to offer the queen during and after delivery
15. Fresh water for the queen
16. Regular number for the veterinary clinic and the emergency veterinary clinic number and directions

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17. Numbers for family/friends/sitter to watch the children during delivery and if necessary to go to the veterinary clinic
18. Books and information on delivery and care of newborn kittens
19. Watch or clock to record times of delivery
20. Camera, film, and extra battery if she will allow photographs to be taken
21. Ink pen and note pad to mark the arrival time, sex, weight, color, and markings, and if the placenta was expelled

Preparing the queen

The hair on the queen's belly and around the tail may need to be shaved if it is long or thick to make it easier for the kittens to find the nipples and to keep her clean.

Stages of labor

Average gestation is about 60-63 days. It can be about 1 week either side of that date and still be normal. Several changes that may be noticeable in the queen the last week before delivery include a distended, 'dropped' abdomen, enlarged and softened vulva, enlarged nipples, and full mammary glands. Loss of appetite and nervousness alternating with sleep also indicate the time is near.

Labor and delivery have three stages. In the first stage, the cervix is being dilated and softened. She may moan, meow, or pant during labor. She may make frequent trips to the litter box which should be moved close, and she may show nesting behavior such as rearranging the towels in the nesting box. She may lick her mammary and perineal area more vigorously. Abdominal contractions are not evident in this stage. She may be restless, secretive, and try to hide. This is why the box is in a quiet area in the house. The lights can be dimmed if she is more comfortable. Stage 1 may take 12-24 hours and ends when the first kitten passes into the pelvic canal.

The queen is able to delay parturition, if she is moved to a strange place or strange people or animals are around. She may also stop delivery for several hours between kittens, if she perceives any disturbance to the delivery area.

Stage two starts when she begins actively pushing to deliver the first kitten. The first kitten tends to take the longest to deliver, as this kitten passing through the cervix fully dilates the cervix. She may deliver standing, laying, or squatting. The abdominal muscles assist in the delivery. She should deliver within 15-30 minutes of the start of contractions for each kitten. Normally, 3-5 strong contractions are necessary to deliver each kitten.

The amniotic fluid (water bubble) is seen first. The kitten may come head first or rear paws first. Either way is normal. As soon as the kitten is born, the queen should remove the sac from the kitten's face. She will clean herself, the newborn, and the birthing area. Her licking stimulates the kitten to breathe and start moving. The kitten should be breathing and moving within seconds. The queen will tear the umbilical cord an inch or two away from the kitten's body. If she does not, clamp the cord between two hemostats about half an inch from the body and cut it or tear it between the hemostats. If the umbilical cord bleeds, tie it off with the suture. Kittens have gotten tangled in the umbilical cord, and if it dries tangled around the leg, they may lose the leg. Make sure to remove the placenta and cord, if the queen does not. If you need to pick up the kitten right after birth, keep it in a head-down position to allow fluid to drain out of the lungs and nasal passages.

A kitten that had a difficult time being born may be weak or not breathing when finally delivered. The bulb syringe should be used to clear the airways. Some breeders will 'swing' the kitten downward between their own legs. Be very careful if you elect to do so. Kittens have been thrown across rooms when the person loses hold of them. The pressure of the swing helps to clear the airways, but it will also swing the brain against the skull. When fluid has been removed from the air passages, the kitten needs to be roughly, but carefully, rubbed with a cloth to stimulate the breathing. Try CPR on a nonbreathing kitten for at least 5 minutes to see if he will breathe. Some kittens, especially if born by c-section, need 20 minutes of work to survive. Once the kitten starts giving lusty cries and moving, the immediate danger should be past.

At this point, the kitten can be presented to the mother. Allowing the mother to lick the kitten will continue to stimulate respirations.

Kittens may attempt to start nursing right away or may take several minutes to recover from birth. Some queens do not nurse kittens until all the kittens are delivered.

Stage three is the delivery of the placenta. Each kitten has a placenta and it is usually delivered with the kitten. Keep track of the placentas on the notepad, as she may have two kittens and then two placentas. The queen will usually eat the placenta. After two or three, the owner can remove some of them to prevent her from eating them all. The placenta does offer nourishment to the queen, but too many may cause diarrhea or vomiting.

She will repeat the second and third stages of labor until all the kittens are born. Some queens will have all the kittens within an hour and others will take several hours for each kitten. Expect about 2-6 hours to deliver all the kittens. If she is resting comfortably and caring for the kittens that have already arrived, just watch her. If she is continuing to contract and does not deliver another kitten within half an hour, contact your veterinarian right away.

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She may like a drink of fresh water or small amount of food during labor and delivery.

Allow the kittens to nurse between deliveries, if the queen will allow. This will stimulate release of the hormone oxytocin which will help in the delivery of the next kitten as well as the "let down" of milk. The kittens are only able to absorb the colostrum through their intestines for the first 24 hours of life. After that time, they are no longer able to get any immunity from the dam. The queen should be licking their perineal area and abdomen to stimulate urination and defecation. She will continue this for 2-3 weeks.

Records

It is important to keep accurate records during the delivery. A sample record is shown below (although records of weight gain should be kept longer than 3 days). Keeping such records will help you recognize problems early and be a way to follow each kitten during their first weeks of life.

Record of Delivery For 'Greta' 1/5/2000								
Births	**Time**	**Male/ Female**	**ID Marking**	**Weight**	**Placenta**	**Weight Day 1**	**Weight Day 2**	**Weight Day 3**
#1	12:10 P.M.	Male	Black	95 gm	yes	*	*	*
#2	12:25 P.M.	Male	Black with white chest	103 gm	yes			
#3	12:50 P.M.	Female	Calico	96 gm	yes			

*** Record the daily weight of each kitten here.**

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