Birthing Kittens

Ready to help your mother cat birth her kittens? The big day has arrived, so what do you need to do? This process is technically called "queening." Chances are that you will not need to do anything to help with the birth process except to be with your cat to encourage her. You may even wake one morning to discover that your pregnant cat has given birth during the night, and is comfortably nursing her kittens.

However, you should know how to spot potential problems and what action to take, should she need assistance with the birth process.

Signs of Impending Labor

- Nesting
- Behavioral Changes
  These include restless pacing, panting, excessive grooming (especially in the area of her genitals), and excessive vocalization.
- Physical Signs of Labor
  There may be a drop in normal body temperature. The cat may vomit. The abdomen may "drop" a few days before labor, and the nipples may become larger and pinker.
- Active Labor
  Contractions will start and you will see the appearance of the amniotic sac. You may also see a discharge of blood or other colored fluid.

Your biggest role may be to prepare the birthing area and move your queen into it.

Supplies for the Birthing Area

1. Newspapers to line the delivery box. Place a stack in the bottom of the box and remove one-by-one as they become soiled.

1. Clean towels for helping to clean and stimulate the kittens, if necessary.

2. Paper towels for the same purpose.

3. An extra box for placing the kittens in while the queen is still birthing. Place a heating pad in the bottom of the box with a blanket or several towels over it. The idea is to keep the kittens from

being chilled, without burning them. Never place them directly on a heating pad. Drape another clean towel over the top of the box to hold the heat in and to keep out drafts.

4. A laundry basket or extra box for discarding soiled towels

What Happens During Kitten Birthing?

During the birth process, rhythmical uterine contractions gradually increase to push the fetus out of the uterus and into the birth canal. The placentas may be expelled at the same time as the kittens, or within 24 hours after birth. The kittens are born within their amniotic sacs, which the queen will remove. If she ignores the kitten and it is still in its sac, it will be up to you to carefully cut the sac and stimulate the kitten's breathing by rubbing it gently with a rough dry towel. It is a good practice to count the placentas to make sure all are expelled. If a placenta is retained, veterinary intervention is needed.

The mother cat will stimulate the kittens to breathe by washing them with her rough tongue. She will also sever the umbilical cord by chewing on it approximately one inch from the kitten's body. At this time, she may eat the placenta. The kittens will immediately gravitate toward a nipple, latch on, and commence to nurse.

There is often a 10 to 60-minute delay between births, although longer periods of time are not uncommon. If there is a delay of over four hours and you are sure there are remaining kittens, the queen should be examined by a veterinarian.

Length of Time for the Total Birth Process

In general, it may take up to six hours for a queen to give birth to all her kittens. The first kitten should arrive within an hour of the start of active labor, and subsequent kittens will take anywhere from 30 to 60 minutes. She will rest for 15 minutes or so between kittens, and during this time she should be allowed to nurse and clean the kittens that have been born.

If you have been keeping the kittens in another box, move them back with the mother cat and help them find a nipple.

Summary of Potential Problems During Labor

- Extended Contractions without Birth
  More than one hour of strong contractions indicates a veterinary emergency, and your cat should be seen by a vet immediately. Take her and any kittens to your vet.

- Retained Placenta
  A retained placenta can cause uterine infection. It is important to count the number of placentas (one per kitten) to keep on top of this potential problem.

- Kitten Lodged in the Birth Canal
  A kitten that is lodged in the birth canal for more than 10 minutes is in distress, and your intervention may be necessary. Note that although most kittens are born head first, "breech," or tail-first births occur about 40% of the time, and are considered normal.

- Stillborn Kittens
  Sadly, this sometimes happens. All you can do is to remove the baby from the area so the mother can continue uninterrupted with birthing the other kittens.

- Postpartum Hemorrhaging
  Although some bleeding after giving birth is normal, excessive hemorrhaging is an emergency and calls for veterinary intervention.

Once all the kittens are born, your queen will normally be caring for and feeding them. Make sure she has ample quantities of kitten food and KMR now, and for the rest of the time until the kittens are weaned. And if anything seems amiss with either your queen or the kittens, seek veterinary care immediately.