When Baby Makes Four

By Jacque Lynn Schultz

Today, shelters are still visited by tearful mothers-to-be with cats in tow, who arrive after well-meaning relatives or old-school obstetricians have convinced them that keeping a cat risks the health and well-being of their unborn child. Don't succumb to these old wives' tales. Knowing the facts will help provide ways to safeguard both fetus and feline.

Before . . .

The parasitic infection toxoplasmosis is perhaps a pregnant catkeeper's greatest fear. It can result in miscarriage, stillbirth or such birth defects as blindness, deafness, hydrocephalus or epilepsy. Since cats can become infected with the parasite by eating small mammals or birds, it is best to keep your cat indoors—and now is not a good time to befriend strays, as they may already be infected.

Toxoplasmosis cysts are shed in the feces of infected animals, and since cats often use gardens as litterboxes, you should wear gloves when gardening, washing raw vegetables and fruits, handling raw meat or scrubbing food prep surfaces; you should also avoid rubbing your eyes until your hands have been washed. And do not eat or feed your cat raw or undercooked meat. To prevent any cysts that are passed in the feces from becoming infectious, scoop fecal matter at least twice a day. Better yet, use your "delicate condition" to get your mate to handle the dirt detail.

Some cats resemble little old maids who cannot tolerate change. These are the cats most likely to be affected by a new baby, so use the entire pregnancy to slowly prepare them. Play tapes of baby noises to acclimate your cat to the new sounds he's about to hear, or rub baby lotion on your hands before engaging in a pleasant activity with him to create positive associations with baby odors. Set up nursery furniture as soon as possible, and allow him several weeks to investigate before you select surfaces to declare off limits, such as the changing table and crib, so that he can see there's nothing scary here. Then, at least one month before the baby arrives, make the surfaces unwelcoming. Cut sheets of cardboard to the size of the furniture surfaces and cover one side with double-sided adhesive/masking tape. Cats tend to avoid sticky surfaces, and by the end of the month, he should steer clear of these sites.

If the litterbox has been kept in the room that will now become the nursery, move it a few inches a day to its new location. If the transition is made too quickly, your cat may return to soil in his old spot. Covering that area with a solid object like a diaper pail or dresser may deter him.

Finally, any cat care routines that will be shifted from new mother to mate after the baby arrives should actually be switched one to two months before the birth. These might include feedings, grooming, play sessions and sleep partners/locations. If these were always shared activities, the change will make little difference to the cat. If not, the cat will need time to adjust to the style and skills of the new caregiver.

. . . And After Birth

When you first arrive home from the hospital, peacefully greet your cat without interruption. Once you've had a few minutes to reconnect, let in everyone else—dad, baby, grandparents, baby nurse and assorted well-wishers. Unless your cat is extremely social, he will flee the hoopla and go into hiding. Once things settle down, he will come tiptoeing back.

Place a used receiving blanket or T-shirt in a quiet area where the cat can sniff and rub up against it. When quietly nursing, allow the cat to approach and check things out. If he follows you into the nursery at naptime, make sure he doesn't jump into the crib. While there's certainly no truth to the myth that cats suck the air out of babies' lungs, an infant does not have the capacity to turn over or even move her head at first. A heat-seeking cat who chooses to cuddle up close to the baby's face could inadvertently smother the child. Close the door to the nursery when the baby is napping. If there is no door to close, hang mosquito netting over the crib to keep the cat out. These precautions also prevent the cat from urinating in the crib, something he may try if extremely stressed.

With the baby safely at rest, now's the perfect time to grab a catnap with your favorite feline. AW

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