

# Fostering Kittens

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A kitten may need hand raising because the mother has died, become ill, rejected the kittens or abandoned them. In the case of feral cats, the kittens may have been taken from the mother for taming.

Kittens should not be taken from the mother before 5 to 6 weeks of age if possible. The longer the mother cat is able to feed the kittens the better since young kittens need mother's milk for best nutrition as well as important antibodies. This passive immunity usually lasts until the kittens are 6-14 weeks of age. Since orphans have no such protection, they are especially vulnerable to disease.

Very often young kittens come into the shelter without a mother. Unfortunately, the younger the kitten, the more fragile it is. Very young kittens may not survive without a mother no matter how good the care. It is important to understand that the odds of a young kitten (under 6 weeks) surviving on it's own without a mother present are very low. Although the mortality rate can be quite high, you are giving the kitten its best chance at a long and healthy life.

## THE FOSTER ROOM IN YOUR HOME

All fosters must be kept indoors and separate from your pets. A kitten-proofed extra bedroom, bathroom, or laundry room are ideal. New animals brought into your home should be isolated from other household pets. Please understand that whenever you expose your personal pet to a foster cat or kitten, there is a risk of illness or infection. Wash your hands after handling your foster cat/kittens. If your fosters have a contagious condition, you might also want to wear a long-sleeved shirt while handling the fosters, then take it off prior to having any interaction with your own pets. Your pets should be current on all vaccinations for their own protection.

## WARMTH AND FIRST AID

As soon as you get a foster kitten it must be protected from becoming chilled. Most of the young kitten's energy is needed for growth and yelling for more food, so there's not a lot left over for heat generation. Normally the mother cat and litter mates would provide a good deal of warmth. During their first week, kittens should be kept between 88 and 92 degrees F. For the next 2 weeks they still need temperatures of 80 degrees or so. When they reach 5 weeks or so they can tolerate a lower room temperature. When you get the kittens home you must continue to provide warmth. Find a place in your home that is warm, draft-free and isolated. A heating pad under a blanket or a heat lamp can provide good sources of heat to small kittens.

Feeding can be done with an eyedropper or a nursing bottle (available at Petsmart). If using the eyedropper be careful not to force feed the kitten. Let the baby suck the fluid at its own pace, otherwise you can fill the baby's lungs with milk and cause pneumonia.

All utensils should be sterilized before each feeding.

To feed a young kitten you can hold them in your hand on their back. Open its mouth gently with the tip of the dropper or bottle towards the corner of its mouth. Then slip the nipple between its jaws. To prevent air from entering the kitten's stomach, hold the bottle at a 45-degree angle, keeping a light pull on the bottle to encourage vigorous sucking.

Formula should be warmed to body temperature and fed to small kittens every 3-4 hours. As they get older every 6-8 hours will be enough. Check the package for recommended feeding amounts and feedings per day. A kitten needs approximately 8 cc's of formula per ounce of body weight per day. The kitten's age determines the number of daily feedings it should receive. KMR is a Kitten Milk Replacement available at many pet stores. Each package provides the proper mixing proportions depending on age of the kittens.

Normally kittens will let you know that they have had enough by moving their mouths away from the bottle and refusing to take any more.

Do not overfeed kittens, as this can bring on diarrhea as well as other problems.

## STIMULATION

The kitten's natural mother takes care of both ends of her baby. By licking the kitten's abdomen, she stimulates the bowels and bladder and tidies up the resulting mess. A surrogate cat mom should gently rub the kitten's abdomen and bottom with a cotton ball or pad or tissues moistened with warm water. This stimulates the discharge of waste and keeps babies clean. Be careful to rub only enough to get them to expel waste materials. Keep the area clean and watch for chafing which might indicate that you are rubbing too hard or not cleaning well enough.

When you feed and clean the kittens, wash their fur all over with a barely damp towelette using short strokes as the mother would use. This cleans their fur, teaches them to clean their fur, and gives them a feeling of attention and well-being.

If the kittens have diarrhea and become caked with stool, it is easier on their skin to wash them in warm water.

The kitten's instinctive need to suckle (frustrated by the lack of the mother's breast) may cause the kitten to suckle its litter mate's ears, tail or genitals, causing irritations to develop. Try to satisfy this oral need by caressing each kitten's mouth with your finger or a soft cloth.

## FLEAS

Abandoned kittens will need to be cleaned and rid of fleas soon after they are found. Flea anemia can hamper any attempt to save the kitten and fleas carry tape worm eggs. The easiest way to rid small kittens of fleas is to use mild dish detergent. The soap suffocates and kills the fleas. Wet the kitten lightly with warm water and lather with soap (Dawn, Palmolive etc.) Immediately after soap is applied wrap the kitten in a dry towel. Hold the kitten for ~5 minutes in the towel to ensure all fleas are killed. Then rinse the kitten completely of any soap and towel dry with a clean towel. **DRY THE KITTEN IMMEDIATELY.** 1 to 3 week old kittens can be dried carefully with a hair dryer. (Be careful to avoid blowing in their faces.) Older kittens are frequently frightened by the blowing and noise, so towel dry them as best you can and place them in a container that is in a warm place (like next to a refrigerator). You may also try putting the towel-dried kitten in a pet carrier and aiming the blow-dryer into the carrier where the warm air will gently circulate to dry the kitten.

## WEANING

If necessary, you may begin weaning the kitten at 4 weeks of age. Start by feeding it formula in a bowl. Then gradually introduce solid food. Strained baby food or Hill's brand "a/d" in a can works well. Or you can moisten dry kitten food with formula or water. Don't expect the kitten to be weaned overnight. As it eats more often from the bowl, reduce the bottle feedings.

Canned kitten food can also be used to introduce the kitten to solid food. Young kittens cannot chew dry kitten food without moistening. Check instructions on the container. Try to buy high quality food for the kittens (from the vet or pet food stores). Much of what is sold in supermarkets is pure junk food and may not help your kitten thrive.

Changes in diet or certain foods can cause diarrhea, so keep an eye on stools. Diarrhea can be life-threatening to a young kitten.

## LITTER BOX TRAINING

The 4 week mark is a good time to introduce the kitten to the litter box too. Place the kitten in the box after each meal. You may have to take the kitten's paw and show it how to scratch in the litter. Usually the kitten will catch on quickly.

## LOVE AND ATTENTION

Besides food and warmth the kitten needs emotional closeness. Pet it frequently and let it snuggle against your warm skin.

Some experts believe that hand-raised kittens show higher intelligence, greater loyalty and deeper affection for their owners. Cat trainers also recommend lots of handling for kittens and swear that this makes them easier to train.

Some experts argue that no adequate parental substitute for the natural mother cat exists.

## **MILESTONES**

At birth, a kitten should weigh 2 to 4 ounces. By the end of its first week it should double in body weight. The kitten should open its eyes at about 8 days. The eyes will stay blue for about 2 more weeks. (The true eye color will not appear until the kitten is about 3 months old.)

At 2 weeks the ears will start to stand up. At about 3 weeks the kitten will try to walk. At 4 weeks kittens start to play with each other and develop teeth.

The kitten should be ready for adoption at 8 weeks, and can be spayed or neutered at that time if in good health.

## **HEALTH PROBLEMS**

Orphaned kittens are especially vulnerable to diseases. At the first sign of any abnormal behavior or loss of appetite, contact the shelter (856) 401-1300 or in case of emergency please call Stephanie at (856) 466-8959.

Colds, like upper respiratory infections, are caused by various viruses and claim many kittens each year. Some of these same viruses, or an organism known as Chlamydia, can also cause permanent damage to a kitten's eyes. If bacteria invade the infected eye the organisms can puncture the tough covering, resulting in blindness. Even a lesser infection can leave the eyeball badly scarred.

Diarrhea can result from disease, food changes, worms, or overfeeding. The resulting dehydration can be deadly.

Distemper is also a chronic danger to young cats, especially those who did not have the advantage of the mother cat's antibodies. It is airborne, very contagious, and often a killer.

## **A FINAL WORD**

Caring for an orphaned kitten can be difficult and even the most conscientious foster parent may lose a little one. If a kitten dies, the substitute parent should not blame himself or herself. Remember that you have provided the kitten with its best chance at a long and healthy life.

A kitten is most likely to die at birth, in its first week, or while weaning. Increased exposure to airborne viruses and diseases in the shelter environment make the survival rate for small kittens very low as well.