

Raising Orphan Kittens

So you find yourself with orphan kittens. For these babies to have a good chance of survival, they need round the clock care for the first 3-4 weeks of their lives. The younger the kitten, the more fragile it is very young kittens may not survive without a mother no matter how good the care.

Warmth and First Aid

As soon as you find an orphaned kitten it must be protected from becoming chilled. Place it under your clothes next to your skin. 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.

If possible, take the kitten to a veterinarian to be checked out for dehydration and general condition. Kittens can become dehydrated very quickly without a mom and may need fluids under the skin. Kittens that are dehydrated from lack of fluids or diarrhea will have very little energy or appetite, so this is important to take care of immediately. Stools should be checked for worms and parasites. The vet can supply a lot of advice on hand raising kittens as well as needed supplies so don't skip this step.

When you get the kitten home you must continue to provide warmth. Find a place in your home that is warm, draft-free and isolated.

Feeding

Feeding can be done with a nursing bottle. 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 kitten formula and cause pneumonia. All utensils should be cleaned before each feeding.

To feed your kitten, place it stomach down on a towel or other textured surface to which it can cling. Open its mouth gently with the tip of your finger, 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.

If a suckling kitten aspirates formula into its lungs, immediately hold it upside down until the choking subsides. If the kitten is not strong enough to suckle, seek veterinary assistance ASAP.

Kitten formula(KMR) 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.

When a kitten has had enough formula, bubbles will form around its mouth, and its tummy will be rounded. After each meal, burp the kitten by holding it upright against you shoulder and patting it lightly on the back.

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

FEEDING GUIDE

Age in Weeks	Avg. Weight of Kitten	Amt. of Formula per Day	# of Feedings per Day
1	4 ounces	32 cc	6
2	7 ounces	56 cc	4
3	10 ounces	80 cc	3
4	13 ounces	104 cc	3
5	1 pound	128 cc	3

For kittens with a lack of appetite or anemia, "Pet-Tinic" vitamin/mineral supplement (available at the vet and pet food stores) will stimulate appetite and rebuild systems. Follow the directions on the bottle for dosage and give direct by dropper or add to food.

Kittens should be weighed daily using a kitchen scale to ensure that they are growing properly. You'll soon know if your orphans are thriving because they will grow at an incredible rate.

Fleas

Abandoned kittens will need to be cleaned and rid of fleas soon after they are found. Although not recommended by the manufacturer, a couple of drops of Advantage has proven very successful in eliminating fleas and not harming baby kittens. The benefits greatly outweigh the risks.



Raising Orphan Kittens *continued*

Stimulation

The kitten's natural mother takes care of both ends of her baby. By licking the kitten's genitals, 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.

Transitioning from Bottle Feeding

You may begin transitioning away from bottle feeding at 4-5 weeks of age. Start by feeding it formula in a bowl. Kitten formulated canned food such as nutramax 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. This process might take up to a week.

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.

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. Check with your veterinarian as to the timing of the needed vaccinations. 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, take them to the veterinarian.

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. Nor should you accept all the credit if the kitten thrives.

A kitten is most likely to die at birth, in its first week, or while weaning. But, armed with common sense and an ability to care (as well as accurate information), you have a good chance of raising a motherless waif to the adoption age - or beyond.