



Caring for Orphaned Kittens

A kitten may need to be hand raised because the mother has died, become ill, rejected the kittens or abandoned them. If you must feed them yourself before weaning age, you will have to devote a considerable amount of energy and weeks of constant care if the kitten is to have a good chance at survival. The younger the kitten, the more fragile it is. Very young kittens may not survive without a mother no matter how good the care.

First Aid and Warmth

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.

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. A cat carrier or a cardboard box is a safest place to keep the kittens. Kittens can't regulate their body temperature and will chill quickly. As soon as possible, get them onto a heating pad. Put the heating pad on half of the carrier, so if they get too hot they can crawl off. Make sure to put a towel or blanket over the heating pad. Do not attempt to feed a cold kitten - wait until she warms up.

Age

The most effective way for determining the age of a kitten is to take it to the veterinary clinic for an assessment. Until you can take the baby in for a vet visit, you'll need to estimate his age. Consider the following:

- * Newborn to 2 Weeks old - The kitten's eyes are closed until day 10. The ears are folded over. The kitten doesn't walk; instead, he "commando crawls" and squiggles.
- * 2 Weeks to 3 Weeks old - The kitten's eyes are open, but his ears are still folded over. The kitten is starting to walk, but he's unsteady and wobbly.
- * 3 Weeks to 4 Weeks old - The kitten can walk well; he's no longer wobbly. His ears are unfolding into an erect position. He's beginning to experiment with soft solid foods during week 4.
- * 4 Weeks to 5 Weeks old - Some kittens begin learning how to run during the latter part of week 5 and nearly all run by the end of week 6.

Feeding

Kittens under 2 weeks must be fed every two-three hours. At three weeks, they can graduate to eating every three to four hours. Feeding can be done with an eyedropper or a nursing bottle (available at the PetSmart/Petco). We strongly recommend using KMR brand kitten formula. Grocery store brands generally do not provide adequate nutrition. Do not use cow's milk. To feed your kitten, place him stomach down on a towel or other textured surface to which it can cling. Do not hold them on their backs to feed them. 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. Follow the manufacturer's instructions on how much the kitten should be eating. Warm formula in a cup of warm water until it feels warm--not hot--on your wrist.

Stimulation

Kittens under four weeks need to be stimulated to defecate and urinate. The mother cat would stimulate by licking the kitten's abdomen. This stimulates the bowels and bladder. The mother then tidies up the resulting mess. A surrogate cat mom should gently rub the kitten's abdomen and bottom with a cotton ball or pad, baby wipe, 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. This should be done after every feeding.

Weaning

By four weeks of age, the kittens should be started in solid food. Canned kitten food can be mixed with the milk replacer to create a gruel. You may have to encourage the kitten to taste it by putting a tiny bit of food into their mouth. Weaning is a messy process but well worth the effort. Start offering a small bowl of water and dry food at this time. This is a gradual process. Many kittens will begin eating solid food at this time, but most still need to drink kitten formula. Therefore, offer canned kitten food and once the kitten is done, offer a bottle of kitten formula. Let the kitten eat until he's full (he'll turn his head away and refuse the bottle when he's done.) Royal Canin has a dry/canned line of cat food specifically for weaning kittens. We highly recommend it.

Litter box training

Also at four weeks, the kittens should be able to start using the litter box. A small, cardboard box (like the type used for canned kitten food) works well. Do not use regular clumping litter as the kitten might taste the litter while he/she investigates it. There is a brand of litter made to litter box train kittens called Kitten Attract. They sell it at Petco/PetSmart.

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. Most veterinarians will give the first shot at 6 weeks old.

The kitten should be ready for adoption at 8 weeks, and should be spayed or neutered at that time. The Cattery has a low cost spay/neuter clinic- <http://thecatterycc.org/info/spay-neuter/>

Raising a "bottle baby" is a long but rewarding process. Thank you for doing lifesaving work.