

CARE AND FEEDING OF NEWBORN KITTENS

Normal growth and development

Orphan kittens are fragile, and problems can develop quickly. Healthy kittens should be active and alert, gain weight steadily, sleep deeply, and should not cry unless hungry or cold. Crying for over 15 minutes that is not relieved with feeding and warmth could indicate a serious health problem, and veterinary attention should be sought.

Housing

Newborn kittens must be kept warm, but not overheated. If the kitten is a singleton (no brothers or sisters), keeping warm is a problem, as the kitten must rely on the environment for all warmth. Normal body temperature for a newborn gradually increases with age.

1 st week	96 to 98 degrees
2 nd week	99 degrees
3 rd week	100.5 degrees
4 th week on	101-102.5 degrees

Kittens should be kept in a draft-free area of the house, where the temperature of the room can be monitored. For the first week, the room should be kept at 90 to 93 degrees, if possible. After the first week, the temperature can be gradually decreased. After the third week, the room temperature can be decreased to 75 degrees. If the entire room cannot be kept as warm as recommended above, you can use warming devices for the kitten's box. Circulating warm water blankets are excellent heating devices. Another good choice is a "Snuggle Safe," which is a plastic disc you can heat in a microwave oven, and it will stay hot for hours, then can be reheated. Heat lamps and electric heating pads can overheat the kitten, and are not recommended. If you use any heating device, be sure to not heat the **entire box** where the kitten is located, but only about half the box. This will allow the kitten to move out of the heat if he is too warm, and return to the heat if he becomes too cool. Signs of overheating include panting, high body temperatures, bright red gums or skin.

Umbilical cords

If the umbilical cord is still attached to the orphan kitten when he is found, it should be tied off with string or dental floss if there is any bleeding or discharge from the loose end. The loose end should be gently cleaned with a mild antiseptic (tincture of iodine or Betadine are excellent, but you can use hydrogen peroxide if that is all you have). Check the umbilical cord daily for signs of infection (redness, swelling or discharge at the attachment site on the kitten's belly). The umbilical cord should fall off around 3 days of age.

Bottle feeding

The best commercial kitten formula is KMR (Kitten Milk Replacer). Mix the dry formula with water according to the manufacturer's directions on the container and keep the formula refrigerated (heat to 100 degrees before feeding to the kitten). **Do not mix more than 1 day's worth of food at any time, as it will spoil after 24 hours, even with refrigeration.** For the first 2 days, add 25% more water to the formula than the manufacturer recommends. This will help prevent diarrhea, which is common for the first few days of a kitten's life on KMR.

The amount to feed will increase as the kitten grows. During the first week, kittens should eat approximately 10ml of formula per pound of body weight, and should eat about 6 times a day. After the first week, the number of feedings can be slowly decreased from 6 to 3 per day. If the kitten is weak or underweight, smaller but more frequent feedings will help.

Diarrhea during the first few weeks is a common sign of overfeeding. Never force a kitten to eat more than he desires. If diarrhea does occur, dilute the formula by adding 33% more water than the directions indicate for 2 days. If the kitten is constipated and produces very firm, dry feces, you will also need to increase the water content of the food by 33% for several days.

The best way to feed is with a commercial kitten bottle with a rubber nipple. You will need to pierce the nipple with a needle to allow the formula to flow. The hole should not be too large, to prevent overfeeding. When the bottle is turned upside down, a drop of milk should form at the hole but formula should not stream from the nipple.

Kittens nurse best when placed on their stomach and the bottle is held at an 45 degree angle in front of their faces. Feeding an upside down kitten (on its back) will increase the amount of swallowed air, and the kitten will have an upset stomach and gas. After nursing, the kitten's stomach should be enlarged and slightly firm, but not appear overly bloated. You should "burp" the kitten after feeding by gently massaging the stomach and patting the back. You should also gently clean the face with a warm, moist cloth.

Elimination

For the first 3 weeks, kittens are not able to urinate or defecate without help. Normally, the mother will lick the kittens' rear to stimulate elimination, but humans must do this for orphan kittens. After each feeding, gently rub the anal and genital area with a warm, wet cloth, cotton ball, or baby wipe. If the kitten is soiled, you can place his rear under a stream of warm water and allow the water to remove the feces or urine. Be sure to thoroughly dry the kitten afterwards. When the kitten reaches 3 weeks, you will find him accidentally soiling his box as he crawls around. During this phase of growth, you will need to continue stimulating elimination, but the kitten will also need to be kept clean from his "accidents." After 4 weeks of age, you can place a shallow pan with cat litter into the box. The kitten will not understand at first what this is for, but with time he will learn how to use the litterbox.

Weaning

At 3 weeks of age, you can introduce canned food or moistened dry kitten food to the kitten by placing some on a flat plate in the kitten box, but don't expect him to know how to eat it yet. At first, he will walk through it, fall into it, and generally make a serious mess. However, allow him to do this at least every other day.

At 4 weeks of age, you can begin the actual weaning process. Make a thick gruel with either 1 part dry kitten food mixed with 3 parts water (or KMR) or 2 parts canned cat food mixed with 1 part water (or KMR). Warm the food to 100 degrees. Place the food on a flat plate in the kitten box, stick your finger into the food and then gently into the kitten's mouth. If he doesn't seem to understand, allow him to stomp through the food for a while. Often, after getting completely coated in food, the kitten will suddenly figure out **that's food!** and will start to eat by himself. If he doesn't figure it out in a reasonable time, wash him gently, clean the box, and then bottle feed him. Try again tomorrow to wean him. Sometimes a kitten will eat solid food one day, then seem to have forgotten how to do this the next day. Just keep repeating the weaning process over several days if needed. Some kittens are brighter than others!

After the kitten is eating gruel well for at least a week, you can begin to decrease the amount of water or KMR you are adding, until the kitten is eating either canned food straight from the can, or dry food. The kitten should be fully weaned by 7 weeks of age, and you can then decide if you wish to feed him canned food or dry food.

Feline leukemia testing

Kittens can be born with feline leukemia, if the mother was infected. Kittens can be tested for feline leukemia after they reach 1 pound body weight (approximately 1 month of age). The test requires only 3 drops of blood, and takes 10 minutes.

Vaccinations

Vaccinations cannot be given until the kitten is 9 weeks old (approximately 2.25 pounds body weight). Before then, keep the kitten away from all sick cats, and wash your hands before handling the kitten. Keep the kitten box, bottle, nipple, and all towels spotlessly clean to prevent accidentally transmitting a disease to the new kitten.

Deworming

Kittens can have worms passed to them through their mother's milk, even if they nursed only once on their mother. Kittens can be dewormed with a topical dewormer (placed on their skin) at 9 weeks of age, at the time of first vaccines.

Spaying and neutering

Spaying and neutering can be done at 12 weeks of age (approximately 3 pounds body weight). This is also the ideal time to boost the kitten vaccines which were given at 9 weeks of age.