

ORPHAN KITTEN CARE

Raising orphan kittens can be a very rewarding job but is also extremely time consuming. Without a feline Mom, the foster parents are responsible for providing for all the kittens' needs: feeding, warmth, cleaning, socialization, and stimulation to eliminate. For kittens less than a month old all this requires at least a half an hour every 2 to 3 hours round the clock. During the first several weeks we recommend splitting up the care between several adults so that it doesn't become overwhelming.

Kittens less than a month old should be set up in a small area (crate or large box with bedding) that can be kept consistently warm (80-98 degrees). The kittens will curl up together to keep warm but still need warm blankets and hot water bottles since they can't regulate their body temperature on their own at this age. Do not use heating pads—these can be extremely dangerous. As the kittens grow and become more mobile their living quarters should be expanded slowly. The area should be warm, draft free, and easily cleaned. A small bathroom or laundry room often works well. Offer a shallow litter box with clay or paper litter (no clumping litter for kittens) starting at 3 to 4 weeks of age. Clean the box several times daily to prevent soiling of the kittens' feet with urine or feces. "Baby proof" any area the kittens are in. Look for hazards such as exposed cords, open toilet bowls, small spaces where kittens could get stuck, or toxic items they could chew on. Kittens less than 8 weeks old should not go outside. Do not allow other animals to be around the kittens without constant adult supervision. Adult animals may view kittens as prey and may attack or even kill the kittens without warning.

Kitten milk replacer should be mixed and fed warm according to the package instructions for newborns. As a general rule, kittens should be eating approximately 2 tablespoons (30 ml) per 4 ounces of body weight daily. At first, kittens need to be fed every two to three hours round the clock. By the time the kittens are 3 to 4 weeks of age, they can be fed every 4 to 5 hours during the day and go 6 to 8 hours at night without eating. Try to not hold kittens on their backs for feedings, as this can predispose them to aspirating the formula into their lungs. If the kittens are not sucking well on their own, they may need to be tube fed. Contact the clinic for lessons on how to tube feed if this seems necessary. Up until 3 to 4 weeks of age you will need to stimulate urination and defecation after each feeding by gently rubbing the ano-genital region with a warm damp cotton ball or washcloth. Use a clean warm washcloth to gently wash the kittens' faces after feeding.

By 3 weeks of age the kittens can slowly begin being weaned. Start by offering formula in a low dish for the kittens to lick at just before bottle feeding so that they will be hungry and more likely to try eating on their own. Gradually start adding canned kitten food to the formula. Continue bottle feeding until all the kittens are consistently eating well from the dish. By 4 to 5 weeks the kittens should be ready to start eating some dry kibble that has been soaked in formula or water and mixed with canned food. Offer fresh food free choice at this stage. Watch carefully to be sure all the kittens are eating. Some kittens take longer to learn to eat on their own than others and will need to be bottle fed for longer. Continue offering soaked dry kibble until 7 or 8 weeks of age but gradually use less and less liquid to start preparing them to eat plain dry kitten kibble. Kittens who are

learning to eat solid food are very messy eaters. Be prepared to wash off the kittens with a warm wet washcloth after each feeding.

Over 80% of kittens are infected with round worms at birth (they are infected in utero by encysted larva present in the mother's tissues.) All kittens should be dewormed every 10 to 14 days starting at 2 weeks of age. Kittens can be tested for Feline Leukemia and Feline AIDS starting at 2 to 3 weeks of age. If the mother had been previously vaccinated, the first vaccines are usually given at 6 weeks of age and then repeated again at 8-9 and 12 weeks of age. Kittens from unvaccinated or feral mothers can receive an intranasal vaccine at 10 to 14 days that will provide some limited protection against infectious disease until the regular vaccine series is started at 6 weeks of age. Generally, kittens are ready to be separated from their littermates and go to new homes at about 8 weeks of age.

Orphan kittens need lots of socialization with both humans and other animals in order to develop into good family pets. Gentle holding, petting, and talking to the kittens should be done daily. Exposure to a variety of people and noises is desirable. Supervise children with the kittens. Avoid hand play as this promotes play attacks on humans and can lead to aggression. Instead, encourage the kittens to chase toys.

Unfortunately, the mortality rate among orphan kittens is often high. While formula can provide all the necessary nutrients for growth, it does not provide the same protective antibodies that are present in the mother's milk. This means that bottle fed kittens are much more susceptible to infectious disease. An apparently healthy kitten can become ill and die in less than 24 hours. Newborn kittens should be monitored very closely for any signs of diarrhea, vomiting, lethargy, eye or skin infections, coughing, nasal congestion, or trouble breathing. Call the clinic immediately if you observe any of these signs. Healthy kittens should be gaining weight daily. If possible, weigh the kittens daily on a small kitchen or postal scale (a drop of nail polish on the top of the kitten's head can help you distinguish between identical looking kittens.) Any kitten that loses weight should be observed very carefully for signs of disease and offered extra feedings. Do not hesitate to contact the clinic if you have any questions or concerns about your kittens.