

Raising Orphan Kittens

This information is a compilation from many surrogate kitty moms.



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. (For wild kittens you may want to take them away from the mother at 4 weeks to tame them. As they get older, taming gets progressively harder.) 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.

First try finding a foster feline mother. Contact everyone that may have a lead on a mama cat. Cats will very often feed kittens other than their own, and having mother's milk and antibodies are the best choice when available. Unless the surrogate mother cat has been tested for FIV/Feline Leukemia, there is a potential risk in placing an orphan with that mother.

If you must feed them yourself before weaning age, you must devote considerable 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.

WARMTH

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.

A kitten won't eat if they're chilled, so trying to feed them immediately won't work if they are not warmed up first. If you find a kitten that is actually cool to the touch, rub vigorously to create some warmth. It may already be too late, but I've seen this work. It may take a while to warm up.

If you are new to orphan kitty handling, contact a board member or another group member with experience to help assess the kitten's health, age and get them started eating and pooping. Also they will be able to tell if the kitten needs veterinary intervention. Normally it isn't necessary.

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 small cat carrier with warm towels can be used. A 'Snuggle Safe' disc is a good tool to use for kittens. This can be bought at pet supply stores. The

disc is heated up and stays warm for several hours. It will need to be wrapped in a towel so it keeps them warm without burning them. Never lay them directly onto a warming device. Another handy option for quick warming of a kitten is a latex glove. You'll need a heavy duty latex glove, partially fill with hot water. Tie the opening like a balloon. If it isn't warm enough, heat in the microwave for a few seconds at a time. Again, test the temperature. You can hold the kitten against your skin with the warm glove on the other side of the kitten. This is a great little tool. Just always be careful not to leave kittens unattended with the glove in case of leakage.

Dehydration

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. A simple way to check for dehydration is to lift the skin on the back of the neck. If it doesn't snap back right away, the kitty is probably dehydrated. In this case, call a board member for assistance.

Feeding

Feeding can be done with an eyedropper or a nursing bottle (available at the vet or pets supply stores). 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. If the baby is old enough to suckle, the bottle method is best.

All utensils should be sterilized 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.



Don't hold the kitten on it's back like a baby while feeding.

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 assistance ASAP.

Formula should be warmed to body temperature and fed to small kittens every 2 1/2-3 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 your shoulder and patting it lightly on the back.

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

Age in Weeks	Average Weight of Kitten	Feeding Guide	
		Amount of Formula Per Day	Number of Feedings Per Day
1	4 ounces	32 cc	6-8
2	7 ounces	56 cc	4-6
3	10 ounces	80 cc	3-4
4	13 ounces	104 cc	3-4
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 frequently to ensure that they are growing properly. You'll soon know if your orphans are thriving because they will grow at an incredible rate.

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 cloth 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.

Weaning

If necessary, you may begin weaning the kitten at 4 weeks of age. You can start by feeding it formula in a bowl or mixed with a little canned kitten food or baby food. Mixing the formula and canned food works well as it makes a slurry. Remember to warm this food. The kittens still need their food warmed before eating. Gradually introduce solid food by moistening with water or formula. As it eats more often from the bowl, reduce the bottle feedings.

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

3-4 weeks is a good time to introduce the kitten to the litter box. 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. If he poops outside of the box, just put the poop in the box and put the kitten in the box too. He'll get the idea very 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.

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.