



How to Care for an Orphan Kitten

Helping Strays/The Humane Society of Monroe County

Orphan kitten care requires a regular schedule of appropriate feedings, elimination, playing, and sleeping all in a safe and healthy environment. The principles of raising one orphaned kitten are not significantly different than those of raising an entire orphaned litter. Raising an orphaned litter in the complete absence of a mother is time consuming but rewarding. It is very possible to hand raise an entire litter from birth with the same success rate as could be accomplished by the natural caring mother.

Healthy kittens are plump and firm, warm, quiet, and sleep most of the time. Unhealthy kittens have poor muscle tone, initial high activity levels, and cry a lot. If not assisted, they become weak, quiet, and comatose.

How to Feed Orphaned Kittens

Bottles for kittens are readily available and are the preferred method of feeding. Sometimes it may be necessary to use a syringe to feed a kitten until they take to the bottle. A kitchen scale that has both ounces and gram readings will help in weighing the kittens. A scale can generally be obtained for around \$20.

What to Feed Orphaned Kittens

Commercially prepared kitten milk formulas are readily available and are nutritionally balanced to meet the needs of orphan kittens. Homemade milk formula recipes are also available. These are not perfectly balanced nutritionally but will suffice for several days until commercial formulas can be obtained.

Do not substitute cow's milk or goat's milk for a kitten milk replacer. They are not equivalent. Do not feed raw egg whites, as a biotin deficiency may occur due to an enzyme in the white part of the egg. The enzyme is destroyed with cooking. Honey may contain bacteria, which may be fatal to the kittens.

Whether using a commercial or homemade formula, only make enough formula for one day of feeding and keep it in the refrigerator. If using tap water, first bring it to a rolling boil for at least 10 minutes and then allow it to cool down. After that it may be placed in a glass or “BPA free” plastic container with a lid. Another option is to purchase “**distilled**” **water** which you can purchase by the gallon at any drug store or Walmart, Target, etc. Distilled water is 100% free of bacteria, germs, toxins, chemicals, and chlorine. Any other type of bottled water contains the bad stuff we should avoid using. Do not use water directly from the tap to mix the formula as it contains levels of bacteria while not harmful to people, can cause bacterial infections in kittens. Warm the kitten’s bottle with the formula in it by placing into a cup of hot water. You can also place it in the hot water to keep it warm between babies. Place a few drops of the formula onto your wrist to test the warmth of the formula. It should feel a little warmer than your skin temperature. Shake the bottle well before using to decrease the risk of any hot areas of formula. Wash and dry the bottles and nipples thoroughly between feedings.

How to Feed Orphaned Kittens

A kitten is unable to digest food when its chilled or cold. NEVER feed a kitten that is chilled or cold – this will kill the kitten. Kittens that are hypothermic (low body temperature) should be warmed slowly over 2-3 hours to a normal newborn temperature of 97 F. A normal body temperature should be obtained before feeding these kittens. Small shampoo bottles filled with hot water, or a hot water bottle, wrapped in a towel, and placed next to the kitten work well and should be changed as needed.

There are several ways you can hold a kitten to feed it. The goal is to avoid having the formula run into the kitten’s windpipe. The most common way is to replicate how it would feed from its mother by laying the kitten flat on its stomach. Another method, to avoid having your hand clawed, is to tightly wrap the kitten from the neck down and hold it so that again its stomach is close to horizontal. There is no “one” right way, (except for having a kitten flat on its back), so find a position that works for you and allows the kitten to comfortable feed. Gently insert the nipple into the kitten’s mouth, then slowly pull up and forward on the bottle so that the kitten will have its head slightly elevated and extended while nursing. Encourage suckling by keeping a slight pull on the bottle. **NEVER feed a kitten on their back, like human babies are fed.** This can lead to aspiration and death. Be sure the kitten is suckling by checking the level of formula in the bottle.

The Amount and Number of Times to Feed Orphaned Kittens

See the attached **Feeding Chart** for the number of times to feed kittens based on age and weight. For the first 10 days, weigh the kittens daily at the same time to monitor their weight gain. Then 3-4 times a week for another 10 days. The common **first sign** of illness is lack of weight gain or weight loss. Each kitten should gain 50-100 grams per week. By 14 days of age, the birth weights should be doubled and be around 1 pound by 4 weeks of age. Sometimes you have a runt of the litter who isn't gaining as fast but is otherwise healthy but, in general, if the kittens are not gaining weight, they need to see a veterinarian to determine the reason why.

A healthy kitten will spit the nipple out of its mouth when it has had enough to eat. You must be careful NOT to overfeed a kitten if you are having to feed it by a syringe. Use the attached feeding chart to make sure you're not force feeding more than the kitten's digestive system can handle.

Kittens are like people. Some are fast eaters; some are slow eaters. If you don't think your kitten is eating enough, feed it until it spits out the nipple, wait 10 minutes and try again. If you have a litter, feed the entire litter once, then go back and see who wants seconds.

After Feeding - Burping the Orphaned Kittens

The kittens will need to be burped after each feeding to release any air they may have swallowed during nursing. If this air is not released it can cause gastrointestinal discomfort or worse case, death. There are 2 methods to choose from to burp the kitten:

- A. Hold the kitten upright with its tummy against your shoulder and pat it gently, but firmly on its back until it burps.
- B. Hold the kitten with its tummy against the palm of your hand and gently, yet firmly, pat its back until it burps.

How to Stimulate Elimination in Orphaned Kittens

A newborn kitten is unable to urinate or have a bowel movement on his own. He lacks the necessary muscle control over these functions. A kitten must be stimulated to urinate and defecate. This duty is normally performed by the mother. Her grooming or licking of the kitten's anal area will stimulate urination and defecation.

Orphaned kittens must be manually stimulated by the owner to enable urination and defecation. The kitten must be stimulated after each and every feeding. Fortunately, this is easy. A cotton ball or piece of very soft toweling works well. Moisten it with warm water and gently rub the anal and genital area. Within one to two minutes the kitten will urinate and/or defecate. The kitten should always urinate but don't worry if the kitten doesn't poop for a couple days after starting on the formula. Sometimes it takes a while for their system to adjust.

Some kittens will respond better before eating while others respond better after eating. Try both times to keep the kittens healthiest. Keep a record of each kitten's urination and defecation. Kittens will need to be stimulated in this fashion until their bladder and bowel muscles strengthen, usually by 21 days of age. You will know they are ready for litter box training when they start eliminating outside the area where they sleep, which is generally around 3 – 4 weeks of age.

After feeding, wipe the kitten down with a moist (not wet) light piece of cloth, a commercial pet wipe, or a baby wipe that contains no perfumes or lotions. Observe the urine and feces for signs of ill health. The urine should be a pale yellow or clear. If it is dark yellow or orange, the kitten is not being fed enough. Do not feed more formula at one time, but feed more often.

The stool should be a pale to dark brown and partially formed. Green stool indicates an infection, and too firm of a stool indicates not enough formula. Again, if the stool is hard, feed more often rather than increasing the amount of formula given per feeding.

Where to place the Orphaned Kittens

Young kittens do not have the ability to constrict its skin blood vessels. Because of this, the kitten cannot retain body heat and is dependent on you to provide that necessary warmth. For the first week, air temperature should be maintained at 85-90 and a relative humidity of 55-65%. Over the next 3 weeks, decrease the temperature to 75 F. To provide approximately 50 – 55% humidity, place an open container of water near the box (not IN the box!!) to allow some moisture in the air. Never raise infants in a damp or moldy basement area. This type of stagnant dampness is usually cold and invites mildew and respiratory infections.

Temperature control is more critical than humidity.

A nesting box is usually sufficient with the addition of a heating element and plenty of clean, soft bedding, that they can burrow under or lay on top of. The nesting box does not have to be elaborate and using a cardboard box or cat carrier is just fine. Since chilled kittens can die very quickly, make sure that the nest is in a warm, draft-free space in your home. For the first 3 or 4 weeks, you must provide supplemental heating. A longer period of providing heat may be necessary depending on several factors including whether you have one kitten or a litter, the health of the kittens, and the temperature of the room. If unsure, always provide the additional heat source for an additional week or two. You can use a heat lamp, hot water bottle, uncooked rice or beans heated in a sock, electric heating pad set on low, or a heating pad specifically for animals. A popular product today is a Snuggle Safe (which can be purchased online), which is heated in the microwave and can provide up to 8-10 hrs. of heat. If using any heating element that is placed in the box or carrier cover with a towel, or place in the bottom with the towels on top so the kittens won't get burned. **Never place kittens directly on the source of heat without some protection between the kittens and the heating element.** Healthy kittens will move on and off the heat source as needed. Never place an unhealthy kitten on a heating element, as they don't have the energy to move off if they become too warm. Check the pad and wrapping regularly to make sure it's not too hot. **CRITICAL** - Only heat one side of the box or carrier. It is possible to overheat kittens, to the point they will die, if they have no room to move off or away from the heating element. Your goal is to create a heated zone in half of the box and a cooler zone in the other half. The kittens will move from one side of the box to the other to warm or cool themselves. Use common sense. If the kittens are piled on top of each other all the time, they are cold. If the kittens are spread far apart, they are too warm. If they lay next to each other, the temperature is fine.

Place a towel over the top of the box or carrier to keep the warm air in but allow some open space for the exchange of air. Keep the box away from drafts, air conditioning vents, or other sources of cool air. Change the bedding if soiled but at least daily to maintain a clean environment. Kittens should be kept on a surface with good traction such as a blanket or sheepskin. This will help with development of their motor skills.

Internal Parasites in Orphaned Kittens

The most common internal worm parasites found in kittens are roundworms, hookworms, and tapeworms. The gastrointestinal parasites, Giardia and Coccidia, are commonly found in kittens. It is probably the most common battle the foster volunteer faces.

Giardia is a protozoa (single cell) parasite of the small intestine tract. Giardia interferes with the absorption of nutrients and fluids by the intestines. The malabsorption leads to severe diarrhea. A yellowish, foamy, soft stool can be an indication of Giardia.

Coccidia is a protozoa parasite of the small intestine and the beginning of the large intestine. Kittens can develop dysentery from Coccidia and die. The kitten's stool will contain mucus and blood.

There are medications available to cure the various internal parasitic infections of kittens. Stool samples must be examined by a veterinarian to determine what medications are to be used. If a kitten you are caring for has persistent diarrhea, and you are not overfeeding it, you can suspect an internal parasitic condition may be causing it.

Dehydration in Orphaned Kittens

One of the most important things to always check with kittens is dehydration. The easiest way to check the hydration of the kittens is to grasp the skin firmly but gently between the shoulder blades and lift it straight and release it. Kitten skin that is well hydrated drops back down within a second or less. The longer it takes the skin to drop back the more dehydrated the kitten is. In a severely dehydrated kitten subcutaneous fluids may be necessary. Contact the shelter if you are fostering or a veterinarian immediately.

Nurturing and Socializing Orphaned Kittens

Orphaned or hand-fed kittens should be raised together to aid in social development. They should be petted, cuddled, and played with by humans for 30-40 minutes a day over and above feeding and cleaning time.

Kittens need mental and physical stimulation. If they have littermates, they will stimulate each other when moving. Snuggle with each kitten as you wake her to eat

and for a time after eating. They need the nurturing to thrive. Soft stuffed animals put in the box can offer something to snuggle with while sleeping.

It is important for the orphan kitten to interact with members of the household at 3-6 weeks of age. Remember, she is still a baby and must be handled with care, but you should start to introduce the kitten to noises, grooming procedures, new people, and pets. Early socialization and enabling the kitten to feel secure in her own environment will help prevent many behavior problems from arising in the future.

Orphaned Kitten Mortality

Many factors play a part in kitten mortality. Kittens born on the street are subject to influences that can significantly reduce their chances of survival. When they are born to malnourished or ill mothers, their risk of congenital or inherited defects is heightened. Poorly nourished kittens have little defense against disease and infection.

Despite the best efforts at care, proper nutrition, attention to cleanliness, correct diagnostic and medical treatment and detailed record keeping, some kittens “fail to thrive” and die.

The death of a kitten can be emotionally disturbing to the foster volunteer who has cared for the kitten. It is important to understand and accept that some kittens will not survive. What we can do for these kittens, is surround them with warmth and care, and making their passing as comfortable as possible.

Need more help?

If problems arise, or you have questions, contact the shelter if you are fostering, or a shelter/veterinary office near you. If you want to learn more about fostering, there are numerous, well written, detailed articles on the internet, such as www.KittenLady.org or you can search for “how to . . .” videos on YouTube.

Contact Helping Strays for any questions! 618-939-7389





Kitten Feeding Schedule

Age	Weight	Amount Each Feeding	Schedule
<1 week	50 - 150 grams	2 - 6 ml	Every 2 hrs.
1 - 2 weeks	150 - 200 grams	6 - 10 ml	Every 2 - 3 hrs.
2 - 3 weeks	250 - 350 grams	10 - 14 ml	Every 3 - 4 hrs.
3 - 4 weeks	350 - 450 grams	14 - 18 ml	Every 4 - 5 hrs.
4 - 5 weeks	450 - 550 grams	18 - 22 ml	Every 5 - 6 hrs.
5 - 8 weeks	550 - 850 grams	Weaning, offer ample wet and dry food	Every 6 hrs.

Kittens should gain approximately 10 grams of weight per day.

For the first 10 days weigh the kittens daily at the same time each day, then 3 – 4 times a week for another 10 days.

This kitten guide was created from our own foster experiences, and excerpts from the following, for which we are grateful:

PetCoach Editorial “Orphan Kitten Care: How to Care for Abandoned Kittens”

San Francisco SPCA, 2000 “Neonatal Kitten Care”

Foothill Felines Bengals & Savannahs “Hand-Raising Orphaned or Rescued Kittens”

www.KittenLady.org “Kitten Feeding Schedule”