

Orphaned Kitten Care



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Feeding a newborn orphaned kitten is a challenge but can be fun and rewarding. Here are some guidelines to follow when assisting orphaned kittens.

If you are sure the mother cat is unable to care for them, congratulations ... you have a new and challenging responsibility!

We first need to determine how old they are before we try to start feeding them. Kittens eyes generally open between days 7 through 14. If the eyes are still closed the kittens are quite young and you have a lot of work ahead of you. Fortunately, it is very rewarding work to see these little kitties grow and thrive.

I would recommend having your veterinarian check them over as soon as possible to determine their health status and age. Any noticeable health problems such as skin lesions, crusty eyelids or presence of dehydration can be addressed by your veterinarian and appropriate treatment started.

It's unfortunate and sad that not all kittens and puppies receive the nurturing and security of a mother.

Home Care

If you are committed to helping the newborn kittens and become their surrogate mother, then you will need to provide a safe, warm home for them. You can use a box or small crate with plenty of dry, clean bedding. Make sure you change the bedding frequently so it doesn't get too soiled.

Place the new "den" in a warm, quiet place free from drafts, but careful not to overheat them either. Don't put them next to a heating or air conditioning vent. Heating pads under a box can be helpful. The kittens should be in an environment that approaches 92 degrees; monitor the air temperature around the kittens frequently.

Once they become two weeks old they will be better equipped to generate their own body heat and their surrounding air temperature becomes less critical.

Feeding

For very young kittens you will need to acquire kitten milk replacer and some feeding devices. There are puppy milk replacers, too. Many veterinarians will use an ordinary eye dropper or small syringe to utilize as a means of dispensing the milk replacer to the kitten.

Most pet stores or veterinary clinics have nursing bottles, too, but be alert to the fact that some kittens cannot suck the contents through the small nipple. You may need to actually squeeze the milk out for the kitten while having the nipple in the kitty's mouth. Warm it up a little, too, under the hot water faucet!

If it is after hours at your local animal hospital, your short-term solution will be to mix an egg yolk with a can of evaporated milk (make sure it is not the sweetened condensed milk). This is only a temporary "solution" (!) and should only be used for a couple of feedings.

At the first few feedings the kittens will probably only consume a few cc's worth of milk. (There are 5cc's in a teaspoon.) You will need to feed every couple of hours at first and gradually build up time between feedings as they begin to eat more at each meal. Start by offering a small amount. If the kitten won't eat readily from the nipple and bottle, try an eyedropper or syringe and drip a little in the mouth, adding more as the kitten's pace. Make sure that the milk is just above room temperature; try not to microwave since you can cause hot spots in the milk.

Follow instructions on the milk replacer for mixing and storage. You will need to contact your veterinarian if the kitten has not eaten within 24 hours or is extremely weak. Once they get the hang of it, the kittens should consume the milk replacer greedily. You can stop the feeding when the kitten begins to slow down the consumption or becomes disinterested.

When the orphaned kittens reach about 3 weeks of age you can start providing watered down meat-based kitten food for them to nibble on. Make sure you keep a fresh supply and not too much at one time. Once they start eating it as it comes from the can you can leave out dry kibble for them to munch on, too. I'd recommend a kibble with good protein and fat levels.

Keep in touch with your veterinarian if you notice any health problems, or "poor doers". A "poor doer" is a kitten or puppy which lags behind the other littermates in body size, alertness or activity level. The earlier any problems are detected and addressed the better the chance for recovery.

Hygiene

One other thing you will need to do, since mom isn't there to clean up after the kittens, is to stimulate the kittens to eliminate waste during or after each feeding. You can accomplish this either of two ways. You can either mimic mother cat (which I do NOT recommend!) or you can use a warm, wet paper towel to gently massage or wipe the anal and urinary openings. Your kitten should immediately urinate and or defecate. Dry the kitten after each time, and be gentle so you do not irritate the anal area.

As the kittens get older and more mobile and exploratory, you can provide a low-sided cardboard box with a small amount of litter for the kittens to get used to. It is generally instinct for them to scratch in something for their elimination habits. Once they start urinating and passing stool on their own (generally by three weeks of age), you will be able to give up that particular job of assisting them.

Health Care

Some things to monitor over the course of the next few weeks are appetite, activity level and growth. You will need to call the veterinarian if a kitten won't eat, or stops eating. Bathroom habits should be predictable and you will want to talk to your veterinarian if urinating or defecating changes, or if the kitten's attitude or activity level also changes. Other health concerns include upper respiratory infections that create sneezing, eye and nose discharge.

Many times the eyes will get so much discharge the eyelids will gum up and stick together. Use a cotton ball with warm water to gently clean the eyes and open them up until you can contact your veterinarian.

A number of different parasites are a concern and can weaken a young kitten. Your veterinarian should treat fleas, mites, lice and intestinal parasites. Don't use over-the-counter medications without consulting your veterinarian since very young kittens may not be able to tolerate some of these products.

Many types of problems can be determined at the time of the first visit. I'd suggest that you drop off a stool sample at 4 weeks of age (the kittens' age!) for your veterinarian to check for intestinal parasites.

Follow-Up

By six weeks of age kittens should be well on their way to eating, drinking and exploring on their own and be quite the entertainment focus. Have your veterinarian check them over and start them on their vaccinations.

Oh, and good luck giving them up to new owners. It will be very difficult to let these little orphan pups and kittens go off to their new homes without you