

CARING FOR NEONATAL KITTENS

Overview

Caring for newborn kittens can be difficult but rewarding work. Below are a few tips that can help better prepare you to care for these little feline friends.

Tips on Caring for Neonatal Kittens

- **Ask for Help:** Contact local veterinary clinics and shelters to ask if they have a nursing mother cat or experienced volunteers available to bottle-feed the kittens. Many times a mother cat will “adopt” more kittens.
- **Heat and Bedding:** Kittens can easily become chilled and can actually die from chilling within a short timeframe. Be sure that kittens are kept constantly warm. Continually keep an eye out for signs of chilling (i.e., kittens are listless and feel cool to the touch). If you have nothing else on hand, use your own body heat to warm up a cold kitten, and rub gently to aid circulation. Do not bottle feed until kittens have warmed up completely.

At home, provide kittens with a soft nest (like a box or kitty bed) with a heating pad or other warming device. Completely cover it with a blanket or towel, and make sure that kittens can move away from the heat if they want. Change the bedding as needed when accidents occur.

Chilling can occur after a kitten becomes wet. Never submerge kittens in water. If you need to wash them, wash only certain parts or use a moist wash cloth. Be sure to always fully dry them with a hair dryer (on low) and towel.

- **Food:** Never feed cow’s milk to a kitten – this causes diarrhea. Feed only kitten formula, which can be purchased at most pet supply stores. Use kitten bottles to feed, as they are designed specifically with a kitten in mind. Follow the directions of the bottle manufacturer for bottle preparation. Sterilize the bottles before using. Wash your hands before and after each feeding.

If you find yourself with a kitten and no store is open, this emergency kitten formula can be made at home. It should only be used in emergencies, and should not replace kitten formula:

- 8 oz. can evaporated milk
- 1 beaten egg yolk
- 2 TB Karo syrup

Mix all ingredients well and strain. Warm before serving. Keep refrigerated.

From Feline Neonatal Care DVD from the Loudoun SPCA.

- **Feeding:** Hold or place kittens on their stomachs and arch the bottle so less air gets in (do not feed kittens on their backs). Always warm the kitten replacement milk and test it on your wrist to be sure it is warm but not hot. Remember, do not feed chilled kittens.

For kittens 10 days old or younger, feeding should occur every two hours around the clock. From age 11 days to 2½ weeks, feed every three-four hours. From 2½ to 4 weeks, feed every five-six hours. For kittens 4 weeks and older, feed two-three times daily with a wet food/formula

mixture. Follow the formula guidelines for feeding instructions. Kittens will usually stop nursing when full. Weaning occurs around 4 to 5 weeks old. Mix formula with wet food so kittens can lap it up, or put the mixture in a bottle. Then mix with dry food and begin providing water.

If you are having trouble getting a kitten to “latch” onto the bottle, try pulling on the nipple when they start to suck, this will encourage her to suck harder and latch on. You can also move the nipple back and forth in the kitten’s mouth. If your kitten is too ill to suck on a bottle, consult a veterinarian for other options.

- **After feeding:** As long as kittens are eating formula, you must burp them. Put them on your shoulder or on their stomachs and pat them gently until you feel them burp. Kitten formula is sticky, so be sure to clean kittens after feeding with a warm, damp washcloth.
- **Elimination:** Kittens under four weeks must be stimulated to go to the bathroom after each feeding. Use a warm, moist cotton ball to gently rub the kittens’ anal area to stimulate urination and defecation. Completely solid feces usually will not form while kittens are drinking formula.

Start litter training at four weeks. Kittens may start looking for a place to go as young as 2½ weeks of age. You may supply them with a small, shallow litter pan with non-clumping litter. Do not use paper or fabric; while this is soft, it can teach bad habits they may carry into adulthood! Show kittens the litter box and put in a used cotton ball, and this should do the trick.

- **Health Concerns:**
Upper Respiratory Infection (URI) – Though this is common in kittens, you should not ignore it. If heavy yellow discharge develops or the kitten has trouble breathing or eating, see a veterinarian immediately. A mild URI can be cleared up by simply wiping away discharge with a warm, wet cloth and keeping kittens in a warm, damp environment.

Fleas – Fleas on a small kitten can cause anemia. First, pick fleas off with a flea comb. For a bad infestation, bathe the kitten in warm water to get rid of fleas. You can also use a very small amount of gentle, liquid dish soap, to bathe kittens. Avoid the eye area – use a washcloth around the face – and rinse thoroughly. Do not use flea shampoo or topical flea treatments on kittens 6 weeks or younger. Never submerge kittens fully in water. If bathing, be careful of chilling – dry kittens with a warm towel or hair dryer on low, then place on a heating pad.

Parasites/Diarrhea – Any drastic change in stool consistency can mean trouble. Parasites can often cause diarrhea, strange looking stools, and dehydration. Kittens can begin a deworming treatment schedule as young as 10 days old; see a veterinarian for this. If you notice any unusual signs, your kittens should be seen by a veterinarian.

Courtesy of alleycat.org.