

Care of Kittens Under 8 weeks of age

5 Key Take Home Messages

1. **Keep kittens warm**
2. **Provide kittens with adequate nutrition**
3. **Keep kittens clean**
4. **Do your best to protect them from infectious disease**
5. **Provide socialization with people and with cagemates**

Body Warmth

Since they do not have the ability to regulate and control their body temperature, we must help maintain kittens' body warmth for them. Place a warmed Snuggle Safe disk at the opening of the cage or crate. Cover the heating disk with a soft folded towel or blanket so that the kitten cannot lay on it directly. If there is not a heating disk available, place a heating pad on the low setting under their crate or on the bottom of their cage and then place a soft folded towel or blanket between the kitten and the heating pad. Check on it frequently to ensure that it is not too hot or too cold. Kittens should be able to get away from the heat source if they are too hot so make sure that there is a place in the cage that does not contain a disk or have a heating pad under it. Kittens also like to have a nice nest in their cage or crate, so bundle them in a nice fleece that they can crawl in and out of.

If a kitten feels cold, warm it immediately but gently. If you check the kitten's temperature rectally, it should be between 100 and 102.5 degrees. If the kitten's temp is less than 99 degrees, place it on a heating pad wrapped in towel and burrito the towel and heating pad around the kitten or place it wrapped in a towel on a heating disk. After you start warming the kitten, contact your veterinarian.

- **We check the body temperature of kittens rectally.**
- **To take a temperature, place lubricant on the tip of the thermometer and then gently place just the tip into the kitten's rectum and wait for the results.**

Properly setting up a kitten to keep it toasty

1. **For kittens under 4 to 5 weeks of age set up a cage or crate with a heating pad or snuggle safe disk on the bottom ensuring that half of their house has a heated floor and half of it does not.**
2. **Place a nicely folded towel over the heat source completely covering the bottom of the cage or crate.**
3. **Give them a nest in a small box (a canned food carton works nicely) with a soft fleece blanket.**
4. **Cover the cage front or entire crate with a towel to keep the house draft-free and cozy.**
5. **In a foster home, find a nice warm and quiet room in your home such as a bathroom. If possible keep that room warmer than you would like it to be. 80 to 85 degrees is a good room temperature for housing kittens up to 6 – 8 weeks.**



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Kitten Feeding

Cow's milk is not nutritious enough for kittens and it causes diarrhea which is dangerous for kittens. Any prepared KMR or gruel must be refrigerated if not used immediately and must be discarded after 24 hours.

- **KMR formula is made with 1 part powdered formula to 2 parts water**
- **Kittens should eat 2 tablespoons or 10 cc's of formula per 4 ounces of body weight in a 24 hour period**
- **Kittens less than 2 weeks of age should eat at least every 2 hours**
- **Kittens 2 to 4 weeks of age should eat at least every 3-4 hours, they do not have to be woken up at night to feed if they are sleeping at this point**
- **Kittens that are weak or are not eating enough should be fed more frequently**
- **There will be individual variations in frequency and amounts for each kitten**



Proper positioning for bottle feeding a kitten

General Feeding Instructions

Test the temperature of the formula before feeding, it should be warm but not hot, around 100 degrees Fahrenheit. You can warm the bottle by placing it in hot water for a few minutes or putting it in the microwave until it reaches 100 degrees Fahrenheit. If you use the microwave be sure to mix the formula well before testing because hot spots may develop in the heating process.

Positioning for feeding is very important. Reclining a kitten on its back while feeding can cause them to aspirate, which can lead to aspiration, which means that the kitten breathes the formula into their respiratory tract rather than swallowing. This can lead to a reactive pneumonia which may be fatal for the kitten. They must be leaning forward or flat on their belly while feeding. Kittens are most comfortable in a position similar to the position they would be in if they were nursing from their mom. You can place the kitten on its stomach on a towel or cloth, which the kitten will cling to it and knead its paws on instinct. If the kitten is acting frantic while nursing, you may want to wrap the kitten in a towel while feeding it.

When bottle feeding, open the mouth gently with the tip of your finger and slip the nipple in. Once your kitten gets the hang of it, they will search out the nipple enthusiastically. You will feel a vacuum effect when they get into suckle mode. Watch for bubbles in the bottle during suckling and ears wiggling, this

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means they are suckling successfully. To keep air from getting into their stomach, hold the bottle at a 45-degree angle, keeping a slight pull on the bottle. They should be allowed to suck at their own pace. If they refuse to take the nipple or will not suckle, try rubbing the kitten vigorously on its forehead or stroking its back much like their mom would. If you still cannot get them to nurse from the bottle, it is time to syringe feed them to make sure they are getting what they need. If you have a kitten that you need to syringe feed, please let the foster coordinator know.

If you're feeding multiple kittens, you'll have better luck with them eating the required amount if you feed them each several times, taking turns. Feed the first kitten until it stops nursing, feed the second, etc. Then go back to the first and repeat this process. Usually after 2 or 3 nursing turns, a kitten has had enough for one feeding.

Kittens that seem too weak to nurse may be too cold or have an underlying medical issue. If a kitten refuses to nurse, and this happens beyond the first few "getting the hang of it" times, it may indicate illness. Please contact your veterinarian.

When a kitten has had enough formula, it will usually get some bubbles around its mouth and its tummy will be very rounded, almost pear-shaped.

After each feeding session, you should give each kitten a full-body once over with a barely damp warm washcloth, using short strokes like mom would use. This activity keeps the kittens' fur clean, teaches them how to groom and gives them the socialization they need. Remember to make sure the kitten is completely dry before it is placed back in its cage.

It is natural for kittens to suckle on each other or on your fingers, even after they're finished eating. If kittens are suckling on each other excessively, that may be a sign that you need to increase the frequency of feedings. If littermate suckling becomes problematic, especially around the genital area, you may need to separate the kittens. It is a good idea to check each kitten's genitals to ensure that the sucking activity is not causing problems (redness, irritation, penis hanging out, etc...). Suckling on genitals can lead to the urethra swelling shut and having to be surgically reopened. If any of this occurs, please contact the medical department immediately.

Weaning

You will know that a kitten is ready for the weaning process when it is biting its nipple often and forcefully and is able to lick formula from your finger. It is usually necessary to continue bottle feeding through the weaning process to ensure kittens get adequate nutrition and are not overly stressed. The first step of the weaning process is to get the kitten to lap up formula from your finger and then a spoon. Once they have mastered that, try putting it in a flat dish. Introduce the kittens to solid food by offering warm canned food mixed into a thin gruel with prepared kitten formula. Eventually, you can gradually reduce the amount of formula you are mixing with canned food until they are eating just the food.

Place the food in a shallow dish. Some kittens will begin lapping right away, while others will prefer to lick the gruel from your fingers. Allow them to do so and slowly lower your finger to the dish. The kittens may bite the edge of the dish or walk in the food. Sometimes it takes two to three meals or more before they really catch on.

If a kitten does not seem interested in the gruel at all, try gently opening the kitten's mouth and rubbing a little of the food on his tongue or teeth. Be patient as the weaning process takes time. As the kittens catch on, begin to thicken the gruel. Remember that as you thicken the gruel, the kittens should always have access to fresh water in a low spill-resistant bowl.

Kittens usually walk through their food. Make sure they are cleaned and DRY before putting them in their cage. Most weaning kittens are messy eaters; do not leave gruel or water in their cage because being wet rapidly causes body temperature to drop.

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Stimulation for Urination and Defecation

Mother cats groom their kittens to stimulate urination and defecation on a regular basis. If you are acting as the babies' new mom, you get this important duty. Very young orphan kittens will not be able to urinate and defecate without your help, so this is a crucial job.

Before and after each feeding, gently rub the kitten on its lower abdomen, as well as the genitals and rectum with a cotton ball/pad dipped in warm water or a fragrance free baby wipe. Make sure you rub only enough to get them to eliminate because overstimulation will irritate the area. Keep an eye out for chafing and lingering dirt and do not let them get chilled. Kittens should (and almost always will) urinate during each stimulation. They should defecate at least once daily.

- **Kittens need to be stimulated until about 3 weeks of age**
- **Kittens should be stimulated before and after each feeding**
- **Kitten should urinate every time and defecate at least once daily**

When kittens get to be about 3 – 4 weeks old, they don't usually need our help. Place a litter box in their crate or cage with the Yesterday's News litter that is provided. The clumping litter can create litter clumps in their stomachs and respiratory passages and should be avoided in young kittens.

When you introduce a litter box, it is a good time to introduce some dry kitten food so they chew on the food and not their litter. When you are teaching a kitten to use a litterbox, it sometimes helps to place their feces in the box so that they smell it in there. If you have a kitten that is defecating on its towel instead of in the box, move the feces in the box instead of completely cleaning it out of the cage.



Stimulating a kitten to urinate

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Weight Gain and Developmental Milestones

Kittens should gain about ½ ounce every day or 4 ounces per week. Weigh them at the same time every day with a kitchen or small postal scale. Lack of weight gain in a 24 hour period is a cause for concern and the kitten should be closely monitored. Weight loss is cause for alarm and it is time to begin syringe feeding the kitten, as well as alerting the foster coordinator. To syringe feed the kitten, mix up the KMR as usual and then draw it up in one of the syringes you were provided. You can place a nipple on the end of the syringe and then try to get the kitten nursing by slowly pushing KMR out of the syringe and through the nipple into its mouth. Make sure that the kitten is swallowing before you push more KMR in and that the kitten is in the proper position. Let the foster coordinator know how the syringe feeding goes.

<i>Age</i>	<i>Weight</i>	<i>Milestones</i>
Birth	2 – 4 ounces	Eyes and ears are closed
2 – 3 days		Umbilical cord falls off
4 days		Begins to purr
10 – 14 days	8 ounces	Eyes and ears should be open
2 – 3 weeks	12 ounces	Baby incisors erupt, can begin to eliminate without help, crawling/trembly walking. Ready for deworming.
4 weeks	1 pound	Baby canine teeth erupt, beginning to walk but do not have great balance. Ready for their 1 st vaccine.
6 weeks	1.5 pounds	Baby premolars erupt Running, playing, using the litterbox, grooming themselves. Can begin dry kitten food.
8 weeks	2 pounds	Ready for surgery and adoption!

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Bathing and Socialization

Kittens need exercise to promote muscular and circulatory development but will not be ready for play until about 3 weeks of age. Play with and handle kittens, prior to feeding. After each feeding session, you should also give them a full-body once over with a barely damp washcloth, using short strokes like a mom cat would use. Kittens will often get very dirty between cleanings and it is okay to wash a kitten with warm water under a sink faucet but try to focus only on the areas where they need it. A simple "butt bath" will usually do the trick. Your body heat is not enough to warm up a cold kitten – you need to use towels/blankets and heating pads set on low. Make sure you do not leave a kitten until it is completely dry.



Steps to bathe an underage kitten

1. Get a small sink or a basin ready with some warm water. If they are really dirty, a small amount of dawn or baby shampoo can be used in the water. Make the water a nice warm temperature like you were taking a bath.
2. Have some towels ready to immediately dry them off. If possible, plan ahead to warm the towels up in the dryer before hand.
3. Wear long sleeves and gloves if you would like as some little kittens may freak out and start to scratch. Holding kittens gently by the scruff while still supporting their body may help to both calm and control the kitten.
4. Give the kitten a quick but thorough bath to get any food and feces off of them. If only their butt is dirty, then there is no need to immerse the whole kitten.
5. Rinse the kitten off with some nice warm water and then immediately wrap them in the towel.
6. Rub vigorously to get the kitten nice and dry. If the first towel is wet, then switch to a new dry towel.
7. Keep the kitten with you and do not put it back in its cage until it is completely dry. If needed you may also want to wrap a heating pad around the outside of the towel while the kitten is drying.

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Common Kitten Medical Warning Signs

If the kitten shows any of the symptoms below, you should be concerned. In most instances it will be nothing, but we always want to be on the safe side because kittens at this age are fragile and need to receive treatment quickly.

Red Flags – if any of these things occur, you should contact your veterinarian immediately.

- Kitten did not eat at all during last meal
- Kitten had weight loss
- Kitten has liquid diarrhea
- Kitten is dehydrated
- Kitten is listless
- Kitten has repeated vomiting
- Kitten is bleeding
- Kitten has neurologic signs

Yellow Flags – if any of these things occur, you should monitor the kitten and schedule an appointment with your veterinarian.

- Kitten has sneezing, wheezing, nasal discharge and/or coughing
- Kitten has ocular discharge
- Kitten has mild lethargy or depression
- Kitten did not gain weight
- Kitten has loose stool
- Kitten has occasional vomiting
- Kitten has decreased appetite
- Kitten has difficulty urinating or defecating
- Kitten is limping
- Kitten has behavior that is unusual for the kitten compared to its normal behavior

