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Raising Orphan Kittens

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; breeders, veterinarians and animal shelters may know of nursing cats in your area. Try calling any "cat people" that you know for leads as well. Cats will very often feed kittens other than their own.

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 AND FIRST AID

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.

If possible, take the kitten to a veterinarian to be checked out for dehydration and general condition. 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. Stools should be checked for worms and parasites. The vet can supply a lot of advice on hand raising kittens as well as needed supplies so don't skip this step.

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.

Feeding can be done with an eyedropper or a nursing bottle (available at the vet). 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. One company even makes a special kitten nurser which is designed to keep air bubbles out of the baby's tummy. The company is Catac (\$15 to Kitte Res-Q, Dept. C, P.O. Box 723, Santa Paula, Ca 93061). 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.

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 veterinary assistance ASAP.

Formula should be warmed to body temperature and fed to small kittens every 3-4 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 you shoulder and patting it lightly on the back.

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

FEEDING GUIDE

AGE IN AVG. WEIGHT AMOUNT OF FORMULA NUMBER OF FEEDINGS

WEEKS OF KITTEN PER DAY PER DAY

1 4 ounces 32 cc 6

2 7 ounces 56 cc 4

3 10 ounces 80 cc 3

4 13 ounces 104 cc 3

5 1 pound 128 cc 3

For kittens with a lack of appetite or anemia, "Pet-Tinic" vitamin/mineral supplement (available at the vet) 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 pad or tissues 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.

FLEAS

Abandoned kittens will need to be cleaned and rid of fleas soon after they are found. Flea anemia can hamper any attempt to save the kitten and fleas carry tapeworm eggs. The vet will carry flea sprays suitable for use on kittens. Always check the manufacturer's instructions for use on kittens. Adams flea spray (according to one foster mom) has been found to be safe and effective in quick kill of fleas while not harming even day old kittens. After using the spray (as directed on the bottle for kittens) place the kitten on a towel that can be removed with the dead and dying fleas 20 to 30 minutes later.

After the spray has rid the kitten of fleas, bathe the kitten in gentle soap or surgical soap if flea sores are present making sure to prevent chilling the kitten. **DRY THE KITTEN IMMEDIATELY.** 1 to 3 week old kittens can be dried carefully with a hair dryer. (Be careful to avoid blowing in their faces.) Older kittens are frequently frightened by the blowing and noise, so towel dry them as best you can and place them in a container that is in a warm place (like next to a refrigerator). You may also try putting the towel-dried kitten in a pet carrier and aiming the blow-dryer into the carrier where the warm air will gently circulate to dry the kitten.

WEANING

If necessary, you may begin weaning the kitten at 4 weeks of age. Start by feeding it formula in a bowl. Then gradually introduce solid food. Strained baby food or Hill's brand "a/d" in a can works well. You can also moisten dry kitten food with formula or water. Don't expect the kitten to be weaned overnight. They often lick the food off themselves (or their littermates) if they have crawled through it—a fine way to get started on solid food. As the baby eats more often from the bowl, reduce the bottle feedings.

Canned kitten food can also be used to introduce the kitten to solid food. Young kittens cannot chew dry kitten food without moistening. Check instructions on the container. Try to buy high quality food for the kittens (from the vet or pet food stores). Much of what is sold in supermarkets is pure junk food and may not help your kitten thrive.

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

The 4 week mark is a good time to introduce the kitten to the litter box too. 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.

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.

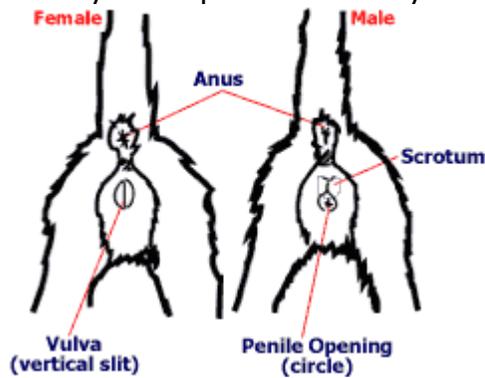
MILESTONES

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.

Check with your veterinarian as to the timing of the needed vaccinations.

The kitten should be ready for adoption at 8 weeks, and can be spayed or neutered at that time if in good health. Sexing kittens isn't always easy to do. Here is a diagram that helps identify the important anatomy.



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, coccidia, 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.

CREDITS

This information sheet is a compilation of articles appearing in "Cat Fancy" magazine, "I Love Cats" magazine, as well as the wealth of experience generously shared by some wonderful surrogate moms.