



Tips for the Care of Orphaned, Unweaned Kittens

You have found some newborn kittens; now what do you do? Here is some information to guide you.

Determine whether or not the kitten(s) is indeed orphaned

Many a well-meaning citizen has assumed that kittens found without their mother are orphaned. Often this is not the case. When cats are left to fend for themselves, mom has to hunt in order to survive. She must eat in order to provide for her kittens. If you are uncertain whether or not mom is present, put the kittens back where you found them. From a distance, observe whether or not you see mom coming or going. If so, leave the kittens be. *Their best opportunity for survival is to stay with mom and their littermates – even if that means they are outdoors.*

If no mother is observed caring for the kittens, you can assume they are orphaned and need to be cared for. Until the kittens are old enough to eat on their own, you will have to be “mom” to them.

Items you will need to care for your kittens

Box or carrier

Blankets/towels

Kitten formula *

Nursing Bottle *

Heating pad or hot water bottle

Wash cloths

Shallow dishes **

Low-sided litter pan **

Litter **

Canned kitten food **

Dry kitten food **

* *can be found at a pet store or some local grocery stores*

** *needed around 4 weeks of age*

Getting started

Set up your kittens in a box or carrier lined with blankets or towels. Place the box/carrier in a warm area of your house. It will also help if it is a quiet and lightly trafficked area. If it is chilly, or if you have a singleton (one kitten), a heating pad or hot water bottle can be placed in the box to provide warmth. Follow the instructions for your heating pad or hot water bottle. If using one of these items, make sure to put a blanket or towel between

the kittens and the heating pad/hot water bottle so the kittens don't get burned. If using a heating pad, use a low temperature setting. Although not necessary, covering the blankets/towels in the box/carrier with puppy/pee pads will protect the blankets and towels from becoming soiled and you may get more uses from them before they would need to be laundered.

Feeding and Eliminating

When the kittens are newborns, they will sleep much of the time. For the first week, they may need to eat an estimated 6 times a day – or roughly every 3-4 hours. As they get older, the number of feedings will decrease, but the amount consumed per feeding will increase. Kittens estimated to be up to a week old and weighing about 4 ounces should be eating roughly 32 cc (2 ½ tablespoons) of formula a day. A rule of thumb is a kitten should eat 8 cc's of formula per ounce of body weight. Formula should be warmed up to body temperature. The safest way to accomplish this is to place the bottle with the formula in a glass filled with warm water. You can also hold the bottle under running warm water. Be sure to rotate the bottle, or shake it, to distribute the warmth throughout.

To feed the kittens, place them one at a time on a towel, belly-side down. Open the kitten's mouth with your finger and gently guide the bottle's nipple into the kitten's mouth. Hold the bottle at a 45 degree angle to reduce the amount of air in the kitten's tummy. Pull back lightly on the bottle to encourage vigorous suckling. When the kitten is finished nursing, take a wash cloth dampened with warm water and gently clean the kitten's face. After the kitten's face is clean, you will need to stimulate the kitten. At this age, the kitten needs assistance to urinate (pee) and defecate (poop). Normally, this would be done by mom. With no mom on the scene, you must take her place.

To stimulate the kitten, gently rub the areas located under the tail. It may take some time, or it may happen right away – but the kitten should pee and/or poop for you. Once this occurs, take a clean wash cloth dampened with warm water and clean the kitten's hind end. If the kitten is wet or damp from cleaning it after eating and stimulation, towel dry it to prevent it from becoming chilled.

You will continue this process for the next several weeks. You will most likely notice the amount of formula you go through will increase as the kittens get older and the number of times you need to feed the kittens will decrease.

Developmentally, at this age the kitten doesn't have much in the way of motor skills. There may be wriggling around to seek out littermates or warmth, but there is no control to the direction the kittens are moving. At around 3 weeks, the kittens will start trying to walk.

The kittens' eyes will remain closed until sometime during the second week. At around the same time (2 weeks) the ears will start to stand up.

Weaning

At around 4 weeks of age, you can start the weaning process. This is when you will introduce “solid” food to the kittens. It is around this time when you will notice teeth peeking through their gums, although they will still be unable to eat hard (dry) food, you can introduce wet (canned) food mixed with formula. (*Make sure to start with a food that is a pate. Food that has chunks will be too much for a kitten just starting solid food.*) The consistency of this mixture will be like a thin gruel. You may need to place the kitten in front of the bowl. Don’t be surprised if the kitten doesn’t know what to do. You can always put a little of the mixture on the end of your finger and allow the kitten to suckle it off your finger. Eventually, the kitten will get the hang of eating from a bowl. As the kittens become more comfortable eating this mixture, you can increase the amount of canned food, and decrease the amount of formula you are using to thin it out. As you notice the kittens’ teeth coming in, you can gradually start to introduce dry food. You will need to soften it with water, as the kittens’ teeth won’t yet be quite strong enough to chew the kibble.

This stage of eating can be quite messy for kittens. While they may try to clean themselves, you will most likely need to continue cleaning their faces while they are eating “sloppy” food.

At around the same time, you can introduce the litter box to the kittens. Make sure you are using a litter box/pan with sides that are low enough for a kitten to climb over. Fill the pan with a little bit of litter. After the kittens are finished eating, place them in the litter box. (This is when they will most likely need to “potty”.) Wait for something to happen (a pee or a poop – or both!). You may need to “encourage” the kitten to cover the pee or poop with litter. You can do this by taking a paw and gently scratch some litter over what the kitten has just done.

At this stage, the kittens are rather self-sufficient with eating and going potty. They may still need you to help them clean up as they can be quite messy. Social interaction is also important for them. If you have more than one kitten, of course, they will interact with each other. Also important is interaction with humans. Feeding, grooming and caring for them provide interaction, but playing and cuddling are beneficial as well.

Veterinary Care

Kittens have immature immune systems, and are therefore, more susceptible to illness than adult cats are. Be alert to signs of upper respiratory infection (URI) which can include runny/watery eyes, nasal discharge, sneezing, coughing, lethargy, labored breathing. Diarrhea is another ailment that is not uncommon in kittens. This can be caused by illness, parasites or change in diet. Dehydration and weight loss are the most concerning results of diarrhea. In general, you should be noticing steady growth and weight gain with your kittens. ***Of course, any time you notice a health issue or have a concern, your veterinarian should be consulted.***

Sometime between 6 and 8 weeks of age, the kittens should receive their first round of vaccinations. At this age, they will need their distemper vaccinations. This vaccine

provides protection from several diseases found in the feline population. Even cats who will remain indoors should receive vaccines. At this time, your kitten may need to be dewormed. Many kittens have parasites (worms) that are easily eliminated by medication. It is not unusual for kittens to have parasites, and is in no way a reflection of the care the kitten received by you.

The rabies vaccine can be administered when the kittens are a minimum of 12 weeks old. Consult with your veterinarian for his or her vaccine protocol. If you do not have a personal veterinarian, it is still important for the kittens to be vaccinated. HSHA holds regular low-cost vaccine clinics. Should you want to take advantage of this service, bring your kittens, in a carrier, to one of the regularly scheduled clinics. The distemper and rabies vaccines and deworming can be administered at these clinics.

Conclusion

Bottle-feeding orphaned kittens can be a rewarding experience. Watching little ones grow and develop can be fascinating and educational. Hopefully, this information has answered some questions and provided you with the information you need to care for orphaned kittens.