

Care of the orphaned neonatal kitten

When kittens are born, they are extremely dependent on the mother for constant, life-sustaining care. This includes temperature regulation, complete nutrition, stimulation for urination and defecation, and continuous cleaning. If any of these are not sufficiently provided, then the kitten's health can quickly deteriorate.

Commonly, as many as 30% of neonatal kittens die within the first few weeks of life. But in situations where the newborn kitten becomes orphaned or abandoned, the outcome is usually significantly worse.

Neonatal kittens may become orphaned from a variety of causes. Mother's rejection, or illness, injury or death of the mother, or insufficient milk production for all the kittens are possible causes resulting in orphaned kittens. A weak or runt kitten in the litter may not be able to compete effectively for milk, and malnutrition can quickly ensue. Nobody plans ahead for the sudden finding of an orphaned kitten but if it happens to you, here are some tips and recommendations to follow.

Temperature regulation is one of the most important factors to quickly address and constantly monitor. The temperature of the room where the orphan is raised should be close to 90°F during the first week. During the second and third week, this room temperature should be near 80°F. Rectal body temperature of the kitten is near 97°F in the first week and climbs to 100.5°F by the third week.

Kittens that are too cold are less likely to nurse – and motility of the GI tract decreases with body temperature, increasing the risk of constipation. If body temperature is <95°F, no feeding or rehydration should occur until the body temperature is corrected.

Heating pads (on low heat) or heating lamps can be used, but care must be taken to make sure overheating or burns do not occur.

A variety of kitten milk replacers are available. Your veterinarian can recommend a high quality choice based on experience. Feeding this digestible source of nutrition is critically important because the tiny kitten has no reserve energy source and needs to eat to have energy to function each day.

Powdered mixes are quite convenient, because you can mix up just the amount you need, and the concentration of the milk can be adjusted based on any changing nutritional needs. The use of cow or goat milk is not recommended, as they are much lower in fat and protein, and much higher in lactose than feline milk. Any remaining mixed formula should be discarded after 24 hours.

Knowing how much to feed is critical, as the replacer is providing both necessary nutrients and the sole source of water for proper hydration. Kittens need approximately 60-70 kilocalories per pound body weight per day. The nutrition label on the replacer and your veterinarian will help determine the volume needed to feed.

If the kitten has a strong suckling reflex, then a small animal nursing bottle can be used. Syringes and eyedroppers are not recommended for feedings due to the risk of aspiration of the milk into the lungs. Your veterinarian may advise and teach you to tube feed the kitten until it is strong enough to suckle. The kitten should be positioned in sternal recumbency (belly to the floor) and not on its back during feeding.

The frequency of feeding is equally important. As with many other issues of neonatal care, we are trying to recreate what happens naturally. Feedings every 2 to 4 hours initially are usually recommended. The exact schedule will vary depending on the age, strength and vigor of the kitten. Weak neonates require more frequent, small feeding than stronger ones. Keeping a notebook of amounts and times fed will help ensure adequate daily nutrition – especially if multiple people are sharing the feeding responsibilities. It is also important not to disturb the kitten when it is sleeping; the newborn kitten will sleep about 90% of the time for the first week.

Kittens are expected to double their birth weight at 1 week of age, gaining approximately 10-15 grams per day. Close monitoring of their weight will help alert you to any poor development so that nutrition can be improved. Use of a small scale like one used for postage may work effectively.

Normally, the mother cat grooms the kitten after each feeding, and also stimulates the kitten to urinate and defecate. Kittens are unable to voluntarily eliminate until about 21 days of age. Therefore for an orphaned kitten, we need to stimulate the genital area with warm wet cotton balls after feeding. The kitten is expected to urinate after each stimulation; defecations should occur 2 to 3 times daily. Diarrhea or constipation is a common consequence of changes in the formula, or incorrect feeding practices. Your veterinarian will be able to advise you about the technique used for stimulation and about your concerns with inconsistent urinations or defecations.

By the third week of age, healthy kittens may begin to lap liquids, and their teeth should begin to erupt. Toys for mental stimulation can be introduced then. By the fourth week, soft kitten food may be introduced; initially a gruel mixture will aid in the transition (such as 1 part canned kitten food to 3 parts milk replacer). Kittens make a mess exploring their food and learning to eat. Be prepared to clean their faces and feet after every feeding!

Hopefully this summary will be helpful if you find yourself with an orphaned kitten. Troubles can occur suddenly and can be life threatening, so meet with your veterinarian so that your individual plan is complete and the majority of troubles can be prevented.