

The Care and Feeding of Orphaned Kittens

By Virginia Clemans, DVM

If you have never raised an orphan kitten, then you're in for a sometimes difficult, definitely time-consuming, but very rewarding experience. Hand-raised kittens have their own distinct personality traits and are bonded to you for life! As we all know, Mother Nature knows what she's doing – mother cats are infinitely more skilled at raising their kittens than are mere humans. Newborn orphaned kittens are very fragile and require intensive nursing care, and the mortality rate is rather high.



There are several problems that you are likely to encounter. Most of these are easy to eliminate. Keep in mind that raising orphaned kittens is a lot like caring for a newborn human infant – all of the same needs must be addressed and met.

One of the first problems encountered is hypothermia, or chilling. Newborn kittens are unable to control their body temperature, so they must be kept warm and dry and away from drafts. A chilled kitten wastes almost her entire energy reserves just trying to keep warm. Also, a cold kitten cannot properly digest any food that is given and is therefore unwilling to nurse. A heating pad (covered with a towel) is a must for the proper care of newborns. Even in a well-heated house, kittens need to be kept on a heating pad at all times. The heating pad should be kept on a low setting. Check the temperature by testing with your hand – the bed should be warm, not hot.

Another problem commonly encountered is hypoglycemia (low blood sugar). Since nursing kittens normally have almost constant access to food, orphaned kittens need to be fed very often (at least every 2 hours, around the clock) to keep their energy levels at an optimum level. Kittens who go longer than this between feedings quickly become lethargic and can even have seizures.

Small kittens can also become dehydrated fairly rapidly. If you notice that your kitten's skin seems to stick together at the nape of the neck, or if his mouth seems dry, then he's probably dehydrated. To prevent dehydration, try to keep the kittens in an environment with a relative humidity of 85 to 90 percent. If you live in a dry climate or if your house is heated, try putting a humidifier in the kittens' room.

The preferred diet for newborn kittens is a commercial kitten milk replacer. Milk replacers can be purchased at most pet supply stores or at a veterinary clinic or hospital. Do not feed the kittens straight cow's milk or human baby formula. Make sure the milk replacer is kept fresh. Refrigerate it between feedings, and warm it to about 95 to 100 degrees before feeding. Test it on your forearm – the same as you would for human babies. It should be just slightly warmer than your skin.

Kitten baby bottles are available where the replacer formula is sold and are the best

way to feed your newborns. If the kittens are unwilling to take feedings, or if vomiting or diarrhea develops, consult with a veterinarian as soon as possible. Kittens can become weak and die very rapidly if they don't get nourishment.

As for the amount of feeding, kitten milk replacers have directions on their labels for the proper amounts to feed. By the third or fourth week, the kittens can be offered gruel made of replacer formula mixed with wet cat or kitten food. (Avoid fish flavor, since it can cause diarrhea.)

Kittens also need help with proper elimination, so you'll need to stimulate them to urinate and defecate. Rub the genital/anal area gently with a warm, wet cloth or paper towel until you see urine and/or feces. Perform this stimulation after each feeding. You can discontinue the stimulation after the third or fourth week, when the kittens should be eliminating on their own.

Finally, to ensure that you have healthy, happy kittens, take them in to see a veterinarian as soon as possible and return for follow-up visits as recommended.

Dr. Virginia Clemans was Best Friends' chief veterinarian from 2001 to 2004. She now resides in Salt Lake City, where she is chief of staff for the Utah County Fix, a low-cost, high-volume spay/neuter and vaccine clinic sponsored by No More Homeless Pets in Utah, Maddie's Fund and Best Friends Animal Society.