

## BASIC KITTEN CARE

This fact sheet explains the basics of caring for motherless neonatal (very young) kittens.

### **If You Find Kittens**

First, determine whether they have a mother. Mother cats may be out for several hours at a time, so try to wait somewhere unobserved to see if she comes back.

If the kittens have a mother, you have several options:

▮ Take the mother and kittens into your home and confine them in a large cage or a small room such as a bathroom. This prevents the mother cat from moving the kittens and she will take care of raising them until they are old enough to be socialized and placed in homes. Once the kittens have been fully weaned, the mother can then be spayed and returned to her original habitat.

▮ Allow mom to care for her kittens where you found them. Unfortunately, she may move them at any time, so try to make the location as attractive and comfortable as possible. Give her a comfortable shelter and provide food and water every day. If you catch the kittens when they are weaned they can be socialized and placed in homes.

▮ Take the kittens from the mother, have her spayed, and raise the kittens yourself. This ensures that the mother will not move the kittens and they will be socialized to humans, but remember that in most cases it is best to keep kittens with their mother for the first few weeks of life.

If the kittens are indeed orphans, bring them into your home to establish their age, medical, and feeding needs. At this point, you must act quickly because neonatal kittens are fragile. Delay can be fatal.

**Kittens should be alert and warm to the touch. If the kittens are cold and listless, they must be warmed up immediately. Chilling is the major cause of death of neonatal kittens, and can happen in just a few hours. Do not attempt to feed chilled kittens. Place the kittens in a box or pet carrier with a towel-covered heating pad set on low inside the box. Be sure the heating pad covers only half of the bottom of the box-the kittens must be able to move off the heating pad if it becomes too warm.**

## Determining Age

- ◆ Under one week: Eyes shut, ears flat to head, skin looks pinkish. Part of umbilical cord may still be attached.
- ◆ 1 week- 10 days: Eyes beginning to open, ears still flat. A kitten this age is smaller than your hand.
- ◆ 3 weeks: Eyes are fully open, ears are erect, teeth are visible. Kittens this age are just starting to walk and will be very wobbly.
- ◆ 4-5 weeks: Eyes have changed from blue to another color and/or kittens have begun to pounce and leap. Kittens this age will begin to eat regular cat food.
- ◆ 8 weeks: Kittens this age weigh approximately two pounds. If they have not been exposed to humans, they will likely be feral and unapproachable.

The following instructions are for kittens approximately four weeks old and younger. If the kittens you find can already eat regular cat food, see The SF/SPCA fact sheet "[Socializing Feral Kittens](#)."

## Feeding

Kittens cannot be fed until they are warmed-feeding chilled kittens is very dangerous. **Do not feed cow's milk**-it causes diarrhea which can lead to severe dehydration. You will need KMR or other kitten milk replacement formula, along with special bottles for feeding. The premixed liquid formula is easier to use than the powdered form. These supplies are available at veterinary offices and pet supply stores.

Depending on their age, kittens will need to be fed every two to six hours around the clock. To prepare the bottle, pierce a hole in the nipple with a pin or make a tiny slit with a razor. Make sure the hole is big enough for the milk to get through. Test the formula on your wrist-it should be slightly warm, not hot, not cold.

After they eat, kittens need help to urinate and defecate. To do this, moisten a cotton ball with warm water and gently rub the kitten's anal area. Waste will be mostly liquid at this point.

### Homemade Young Kitten Formula (2 Choices)

<b>Kitten formula (do not use if diarrhea is present)</b>	<b>2 cups whole milk</b>
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**1 can evaporated milk**

**1 egg yolk**

**2 tablespoons light Karo corn syrup**

**Mix all three ingredients well and keep in tightly sealed jar in refrigerator.**

**At feeding time mix 1/2 of the estimated feeding amount with an equal amount of boiling water.**

**Once a day mix 1 drop of human infant liquid vitamins in each kitten's formula.**

**Test temperature before feeding. The combination of boiling water and chilled formula should be just about right.**

**If constipation occurs add 1 drop of vegetable oil to each kitten's formula no more than once daily until problem is eased.**

**2 raw organic egg yolks**

**2 tbs. protein powder**

**6 drops liquid vitamins for children**

**Beat w/a fork or whisk. Warm the formula first to bath temperature (101 degrees) by standing feeder in a bowl of hot water. Feed kittens in a doll bottle or pet nurser. Do not feed the kitten on it's back.**

**Kittens weight, How much, How often**

**under 4 oz., 1 tsp. every 2 hrs. for 2 weeks**

**4-8 oz., 2-4 tbs./day every 3 hrs. for the 3rd week**

**8-24 oz., 6-10 tbs./day every 4 hrs. for the 4th & 5th weeks**

**Then begin weaning, mixing the formula w/the weaning recipe:**

**1 jar baby food meat (lamb, beef or chicken)**

**3 tsp. baby food carrot or squash**

**2 tsp. baby food creamed corn or barley (comes in a box)**

**1 raw organic egg yolk or 1/2 tsp. butter**

**3 drops children's liquid vitamins**

**1/2 tsp. food yeast**

**1/2 tsp. calcium lactate or calcium gultonate**

**Spring or distilled water to desired consistency**

In addition to chilling, there are other conditions which must be treated without delay:

◆ Fleas can cause anemia in kittens and even death. If you notice fleas, you should flea comb the kitten as soon as possible. Do not use insecticides or any other flea products.

◆ Diarrhea and upper respiratory infection (similar to a human cold) are serious and should be immediately treated by a veterinarian.

◆ If a kitten cannot suck on the bottle, she may need to be fed with a veterinary feeding syringe (no needle).

### **Weaning**

At about four weeks of age you can begin offering canned and dry kitten food. The kittens will begin using a litterbox as well.