



Raising New-Born Kittens

MAKING THE NEST BOX

The "nesting box" needs to be a safe, clean, warm, dry place for kittens to get the tremendous amount of sleep they need to grow and develop in the critical first few weeks. The nest box does not have to be elaborate, and using a cardboard box works just fine!! Warmth is going to be especially vital in the first two weeks of a kitten's life, as they are not able to shiver, and you cannot tell when they are cold. When using the heating pad, be sure to keep it on the lowest setting, and wrap it well with towels and waterproof pads. Set the heating pad **BELOW** the box itself, to one side or corner under the nest box, so that the kittens can move to a cooler area inside their box if it becomes too warm for them. You will want the nest box to be in a quiet, private, draft-free location, with the sides of the box high enough to keep the kittens in, and the overall box size large enough to allow for some exercise. Be sure that the kittens can not get stuck under some pads in the sides or corners of the box, or that they cannot climb under the layers of towels and get directly on to the heating pad (which is why we recommend placing the pad under, not in, the box).

BOTTLE FEEDING

Bottle feeding a kitten requires special nursers designed for hand-feeding kittens. Gently insert the nipple into the mouth of the kitten - preferably while he/she is resting on his/her stomach -- then slowly pull up and forward on the bottle so that the kitten will have his/her head slightly elevated and extended while nursing. Be sure that the kitten is actually suckling by checking the level of formula in the nurser bottle.

How much to actually bottle feed the kittens? It is actually better to under-feed rather than over-feed a kitten in the first few days. A bottle-fed kitten will usually stop nursing when it is full. If you notice milk coming out of its nose, the milk is being delivered too fast, which means that the hole in the nipple is too large. (If the kitten continues to bubble the formula out of his/her nose each feeding, you will want to have a vet check the kitten carefully to be sure the inside palate are of its mouth has fully developed.) You will need to warm the formula before giving it to the kitten. The bottle should be warm but not hot to the touch. Put the sterilized bottle into a warm bowl of water to warm it rather than use the microwave, which can cause "hot spots" in the formula. We have found it is easier to start young kittens off using a plastic syringe (without the needle of course!) From the newborn stage until the kittens are about 1 1/2 weeks old, use a 3 cc. syringe, and feed every 2 hours. At 1 1/2 weeks old, they are ready for the 6 cc. syringe size and feeding every 3 hours, and at about 3 weeks old, move them up to a 12 cc. syringe, feeding them at least every 4 hours. An average meal for a 3-week old kitten can vary from a single syringe full (12 fluid cc) to three syringes (36 fluid cc) for a large and hungry kitten!!! Use KMR (Kitten Milk Replacer) formula, available in most large pet and feed supply stores. While the powdered form is more economical, it does not always reconstitute as lump-free as needed to flow through the syringes (best method is to mix a small amount with cold water first, similar to the process of making lump-free gravy, then add the mixture to the rest of the batch), so we usually purchase the liquid form in the cans. Shop around to find an economical source for purchasing the formula in your area.



How much formula to give? It is recommended that you give 2 tablespoons of liquid formula for every 4 ounces of body weight per day. For very young kittens, you will need to divide their total daily amount into six equal sized feedings, and yes, this does mean during the night, also!! As the kittens grow, the number of feedings and their frequency can be decreased. Also as they grow, they can let you know better when they are actually hungry. Kittens that are not getting enough nourishment may cry continuously, suck on each other or on themselves, and they may have prominent hips or backbones.

Do I need to burp the kitten? After each feeding, you will need to hold the kitten against your shoulder and gently burp him/her. Another technique is to hold the kitten so his/her back is against your chest and gently cuddle him/her under your neck while rubbing his/her tummy. A steady weight gain of about 10 grams (or 1/3 of an ounce) per day is recommended, but do not be surprised if a kitten may stay at the same weight for a day or two, then suddenly the weight gains are seen. After feeding, burping and weighing the kitten, check to see if the bedding in the nest box needs to be changed, and that the temperature is correct. Then, put the kitten back in the box so that he/she can sleep. A properly fed kitten will sleep through to the next feeding.

STIMULATING ELIMINATION

Normally, kittens will have a couple of firm, yellowish stools per day if they are being properly fed. Also after each feeding, you will need to gently massage and stimulate the anal and genital area with a sterile cotton ball or piece of gauze dipped in warm water. This will cause the kitten to urinate and have bowel movements, and it is very important that you continue to do this for the kitten until he/she is definitely using the litterbox on his/her own, even though most kittens can control their own bowel movements at about 10 days old. The skin area is very delicate and may become raw or sore from your efforts. If this happens, apply a tiny dab of Preparation H ointment to the affected area after each stimulation. Keep in mind that your kitten will probably not have a bowel movement every feeding, and sometimes even skip a day. This should be fine as long as the kitten is growing, eating well, not showing any signs of distress, and urinating.

Young kittens must be protected from disease!! ALWAYS wash your hands before and after handling the kittens, and ALWAYS clean and sterilize your bottles, nipples, brushes, or tube feeders in boiling water after each use!! If your kittens did not receive their mother's colostrums (the watery milk the queen produces in the first couple of days after giving birth), your kittens are at an even higher risk as they did not receive the antibodies present in the colostrum. In that case, be sure to keep them separated from any other animals, also.

DIARRHEA/CONSTIPATION

What does a loose and/or yellow stool mean? This may indicate overfeeding. Try diluting the formula strength with liquid, unflavored Pedialyte by about 1/3 until the stool returns to normal, then gradually bring the formula back to full strength.

What does a loose and/or greenish color stool mean? Food is moving too quickly through the kitten's system, and the bile is not being absorbed- probably attributed to moderate overfeeding. Cut the formula back with the Pedialyte or bottled water; in severe cases use 2 to 3 drops of Kaopectate every four hours until this problem clears up.



What about stools that look like cottage cheese? Either the formula strength is too rich, there is severe overfeeding, or the kitten may have a bacterial infection. Check with the shelter manager who may recommend that you cut the formula in half with bottled water and/or Pedialyte liquid, and start the kitten on antibiotics. If the kitten is seriously dehydrated, fluids can be given under the skin.

Constipated or straining kittens? Increase the strength of the formula, and feed slightly smaller amounts, but more frequently. If the kitten has a swollen abdomen and hasn't passed a bowel in over a day, you may want to try mineral oil given by mouth (3 drops per ounce of body weight). Call the shelter manager or veterinary technician if the kittens develop these symptoms for advice.

INTRODUCING SOLID FOODS

Kittens from the same litter can differ widely as to when they start accepting solid foods (the weaning process). At about four weeks old, most kittens express some interest in solid foods. Be sure to treat this weaning time as a positive experience, so the kitten will not be frightened. Start by offering some formula on your finger. If the kitten does not lick it off, then you should gently smear the formula on his/her mouth, being careful not to get the formula on his/her nose or restrict its breathing. The kitten will definitely clean himself, and get the formula that way.

Remember, kitten's digestive system is delicate and can easily get upset. Taking it very slowly, continue to work on the kitten's lapping skills, by using your finger, and encouraging the kitten to lap up formula from your finger. The next step is to gradually add some slightly warmed baby food to the formula, making a "gruel" out of it. You may have heard that baby food is dangerous to kittens due to the dehydrated onion that is used; the major baby food brands such as Gerbers and Beechnut have eliminated those ingredients from their recipes, and you can use the baby food with confidence. One of the reasons baby food (lamb, chicken or turkey flavors...start with lamb and stay with it if possible) works so well with kittens is that it is easy for them to lap up, but more importantly, it has a high degree of odor, which stimulates the kitten's appetite and encourages her to eat, when she is young or sick, and not able to smell properly or understand that she is hungry.

Be patient. Some kittens do not even express interest in solid foods until they are seven weeks old...that is extreme, but it can happen. Continue working with the kitten a minimum of four times a day, and supplement with a bottle or syringe to be sure the kitten is getting adequate nutrition per day. As the kitten learns to eat solids, you want to gradually introduce the wet food that you want to have your kitten eat, such as Iams Lamb and Rice canned food. Lamb and rice is popular as it is the easiest mixture for kittens to digest. Keep the "gruel" very moist with bottled water or Pedialyte, and gradually decrease the amount of baby food and increase the amount of canned cat food. Also, be sure you are offering a high quality, scientifically formulated dry food for your kittens available at ALL TIMES (e.g. Purina Kitten Chow). Some kittens will actually prefer the dry food to the wet food, and will enjoy teething and crunching on the small kibble pieces.

OTHER TIPS

Make sure your kitten does not get dehydrated. The easiest way to check how hydrated your kitten is, is to grasp the skin firmly but gently between the kitten's shoulder blades, and lift it straight up with a twisting motion as you release it. Kitten skin that is well hydrated pops back within a second or less. The longer it takes the skin to return to its place, the more fluids your kitten needs. In severely dehydrated kittens, the shelter manager may decide to inject water or electrolyte solution under the kitten's skin, for faster absorption.