

Caring For Neonatal Kittens

Here are some important tips to keep in mind if have to care for a neonatal kitten (one- to five-weeks old). Be aware that sometimes, no matter what you do, some neonatal kittens do not survive and can fade very fast. You can only try to be the best surrogate guardian possible, and hope for the best.

- **Heat and Bedding:** Kittens can easily become chilled and can actually die from chilling within a short timeframe. Be sure that from the moment you find them, the kittens are provided heat support and kept constantly warm as they cannot control their own body temperature until at least three weeks old. Do not bottle feed until kittens have warmed up completely.

At home, provide kittens with a soft nest (like a box or kitty bed) with a warming pad. Completely cover it with a blanket or towel, and make sure that kittens cannot burrow under the towel and sit directly on the heating pad as they can sustain severe burns from it. They should also be able to move away from the heat if they want. Change the bedding as often as is needed if soiled.

Chilling can occur after a kitten becomes wet. Never submerge kittens in water. If you need to wash them, wash only certain parts or use a moist wash cloth. Be sure to always fully dry them with a towel.

- **Food:** Never feed kittens cow's milk—this causes diarrhea. Feed only kitten formula, such as KMR, which can be purchased from most pet supply stores or your veterinarian. Use kitten bottles to feed, as they are designed specifically with a kitten in mind. Follow the directions of the bottle manufacturer for bottle preparation. You may have to make your own holes in the nipple with a sterilized pin or razor; be sure you do this correctly so that the kitten replacement milk drips out slowly when the bottle is turned upside down. Sterilize the bottles before using. Wash your hands before and after each feeding.
- **Feeding:** Hold or place kittens on their stomachs and arch the bottle so less air gets in (do not feed kittens on their backs). Always warm the kitten replacement milk and test it on your wrist to be sure it is warm but not hot.

For kittens 10 days and younger, feeding should occur every 2 hours around the clock. From the age of 10 days to 3 weeks, reduce feeding to every 3–4 hours. From 3 to 5 weeks, feed every 4–6 hours. At 4 - 5 weeks, start weaning them onto solid food. Do this by mixing canned food or plain chicken baby food into the bottle to introduce solid foods into their diet. After 2 - 4 days, start putting the food on a dish and encourage the kitten to eat it from there. It does take a few tries before kittens realize that they should be eating it. They will often walk in their food and will need to have frequent cleanings initially. Over a period of 5-7 days, wean them off the KMR and just onto kitten canned food and kibble and provide a water bowl.

If you are having trouble getting a kitten to “latch” onto the bottle, try pulling on the nipple when they start to suck, this will encourage her to suck harder and latch on. You can also try moving the nipple back and forth in the kitten’s mouth. If your kitten is too ill to suck on a bottle, you may have to use tube feeding. Consult a veterinarian before attempting this yourself.

- **After feeding:** As long as kittens are eating formula, you must burp them. Put them on their stomachs and pat them gently until you feel them burp. Kitten formula is sticky, so be sure to clean kittens after feeding with a warm, damp washcloth.
- **Elimination:** Kittens under five weeks must be stimulated in order to go to the bathroom after each feeding. Usually a mother cat would lick her kittens, but you can use a warm, moist cotton ball to gently rub the kittens’ anal area to stimulate urination and defecation. Completely solid feces usually will not form while kittens are drinking formula. Kittens sometimes need to be stimulated both before and after feedings.

Start litter training at four weeks. Kittens may start looking for a place to go as young as 2½ weeks of age. You may supply them with a small, shallow litter pan with non-clumping litter. Do not use paper or fabric; while this is soft, it can teach bad habits they may carry into adulthood! Show kittens the litter box and put in a used cotton ball, and this should do the trick.

Contact your veterinarian if the kitten is producing stools that are too firm or loose, as constipation and diarrhea are common problems seen in bottle fed kittens and often the KMR formula needs to be adjusted.

Never hesitate to call us if you have any questions or concerns, we are here to help you.

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