



## Caring for Neonatal Kittens

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If you find yourself caring for kittens who are newborn to 4 weeks old (aka neonatal kittens) these tips will help you be the best caregiver possible. But we want you to know that sometimes, despite your absolute best efforts, some neonatal kittens just aren't going to survive. All you can do is try your hardest and be proud of yourself for taking on such an important job.

### Ask for Help with Neonatal Kitten Care

First thing's first: contact veterinarians and no-kill shelters to see if they have a nursing mother cat to "adopt" the kittens, or experienced volunteers available to offer advice or even help bottle feed the kittens.

### Heat & Bedding for Newborn Kittens

Kittens can get the chills easily, which can be life-threatening. From the moment you find them, keep the kittens warm and watch out for signs of chilling (i.e., listlessness and cool to the touch). If you have nothing else on hand, use your own body heat to warm up a cold kitten, and rub her gently to aid circulation.

Neonatal kittens cannot control their own body temperature until they are at least 3 weeks old. And it's very important to hold off on bottle feeding until the kittens have completely warmed up.

At home, build a soft nest with a heating pad that is completely covered with a blanket or towel. Make sure that kittens can move away from the heat if they want. Change the bedding daily or when they have accidents. A kitten can chill if she gets wet, so never submerge kittens in water.

If a kitten needs to be cleaned up, wash only certain parts of her little body with a washcloth. Be sure to always fully dry with a hair dryer (on low) and towel.

### How to Feed Neonatal Kittens

Use kitten bottles, and try to get the elongated nipples if they're available because they are easier to use. 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 KMR drips out slowly when the bottle is turned upside down.



If you notice the kitten is having a hard time getting the milk to come out of the bottle, the pinhole on the nipple may need to be larger; alternately, if the kitten is having a hard time keeping up with the amount of milk coming out, consider changing the nipple to one with a smaller hole. And cleanliness is key, so sterilize the bottles and wash your hands before and after each feeding.

Hold or place kittens on their stomachs and tilt the bottle so less air gets in. Do not feed kittens on their backs. Always warm the KRM and test it on your wrist to be sure it is warm but not hot, like you would do with an infant.

Remember, do not feed chilled kittens. Follow the guidelines on the formula label for how much to use, but they will usually stop eating when they're full.

## What to Feed a Neonatal Kitten

Stick to kitten formula, such as kitten milk replacer (KMR), which can be purchased at most pet supply stores. If you find yourself with a kitten and pet stores are closed, this emergency kitten formula can be made at home. Only use it in emergencies.

- 8 oz. can evaporated milk
- 1 beaten egg yolk
- 2 TB Karo syrup

Mix all ingredients well and strain. Warm before serving. Keep refrigerated.

*From Feline Neonatal Care DVD from the Loudoun SPCA.*

## Should you feed newborn kittens goat milk?

Never feed kittens cow's or goat's milk—this causes diarrhea.

## Feeding Frequency

**10 days or younger** – every two hours around the clock

**11 days to 2½ weeks** – every three to four hours

**2½ to 4 weeks** – every five to six hours

**4 weeks and older** – two to three times a day. Weaning occurs around this age.



Mix formula with wet food so kittens can begin to lap it up, or put the mixture in a bottle. Then mix with dry food and begin providing water. 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 resort to other methods like tube feeding. In this case, consult a veterinarian.

## **After Feeding**

### **How to Burp a Kitten**

As long as kittens are eating formula, you have to burp them. Put them on your shoulder or 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, and dry them as needed.

### **Elimination**

Kittens under 4 weeks must be stimulated in order to go to the bathroom after each feeding. Use a warm, moist cotton ball, tissue, or washcloth to gently rub the kittens’ anal area to stimulate urination and defecation.

Completely solid feces usually will not form while kittens are drinking formula. If you notice the kittens are having trouble urinating or defecating, consult a veterinarian.

Start litter training at 4 weeks. Kittens may start looking for a place to go as young as 2½ weeks of age. Use a small, shallow litter pan with non-clumping litter. Do not use paper or fabric—while this is soft, it can teach bad habits! Show kittens the litter box and put in a used cotton ball, and this should do the trick.

## **Health Concerns**

### **Upper Respiratory Infection (URI)**

Though this is common in kittens, it shouldn’t be ignored. If heavy yellow discharge develops or the kitten has trouble breathing or eating, see a veterinarian immediately. A mild URI can be cleared up by wiping away discharge with a warm, wet cloth and keeping kittens in a warm, damp environment.



## **Fleas**

Fleas on a very small kitten can cause anemia. Pick fleas off with a flea comb. For a bad infestation, you can bathe the kitten in warm water. You can also use a very small amount of gentle, liquid dish soaps like Dawn to bathe kittens. Avoid the eye area—use a washcloth around the face—and rinse them thoroughly.

Be sure to dry them after a bath so they do not chill. Do not use flea shampoo or topical flea treatments on kittens 6 weeks or younger.

## **Parasites/Diarrhea**

Any drastic change in stool consistency can mean trouble. Parasites can often cause diarrhea, strange looking stools, and dehydration. Kittens can begin a deworming treatment schedule as young as 10 days old; see a veterinarian for this.

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