How to Raise Orphan Kittens

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Orphan Kittens Orphan Kittens: How to Raise Them

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Kittens are usually orphaned when the mother (queen) is not able to adequately care for her kittens. This may be because she cannot produce milk (a condition called 'agalactia') or because she has behavioral or psychological abnormalities which prevent her from adequately caring for her kittens. In rare instances, the mother may actually not be present due to death, injury, or complications arising from a difficult birthing. Some kittens may be several weeks old before their mother becomes unable to care for them.

Successful rearing of motherless kittens requires a regular schedule of appropriate feedings, elimination, playing, and sleeping all in a safe and healthy environment. The principles of raising one orphaned kitten are not significantly different than those of raising an entire orphaned litter. In most cases, an entire litter is orphaned rather than a single kitten. Raising an orphaned litter in the complete absence of a mother is time consuming, but rewarding. It is very possible to hand raise an entire litter from birth with the same success rate as could be accomplished by the natural caring mother. To successfully raise an orphaned litter one must consider:

- Nutrition and weaning
- Sanitation
- Temperature and humidity
- Disease prevention
- Nurture and socialization

Healthy kittens are plump and firm, warm, quiet, and sleep most of the time. Unhealthy kittens have poor muscle tone, initial high activity levels and cry a lot. If not assisted, they become weak, quiet, and comatose.

Nutrition and weaning

If at all possible, get the kittens to nurse from the mother in the first 12 hours to allow for ingestion of colostrum. Kittens are only able to absorb the antibodies from the colostrum for the first 24 hours of life. If the mother will continue to allow the kittens to nurse while she is made to lay still, that will decrease some of the work load on the breeder. She may decide in a few days that she is willing to care for them and remove the burden from the breeder.

If the queen is not able to nurse and care for the kittens, they will need to be bottle or tube fed or a foster queen may be found. Queens will usually accept and nurse kittens that are similar in size (not necessarily age) to her own. Do not expect her to be able to handle two full litters on her own. Supplementation with a bottle or tube will still be needed.

Bottles for kittens are readily available and are the preferred method of feeding. Tube feeding is best left to trained individuals, as the tube may be inadvertently passed to the lungs and cause choking when the formula is administered. Tube feeding, although risky, is warranted in kittens failing to nurse properly. For most instances, however, bottle feeding is recommended. If the kittens are too weak to nurse from a bottle, a veterinarian should be consulted to receive information and a demonstration on tube feeding. Feed a kitten while he is on his belly, not on his back, like human babies are fed.

Commercially prepared kitten milk formulas are readily available and are nutritionally balanced to meet the needs of orphan kittens. Homemade milk formula recipes are also available. These are not perfectly balanced nutritionally, but will suffice for several days until commercial formulas can be obtained. KMR is a well-known kitten milk replacer.

Emergency Kitten Milk Replacer
3 oz condensed milk 3 oz water 4 oz plain yogurt (not low fat)

Do not substitute cow's milk or goat's milk for a high quality kitten milk replacer. They are not equivalent. Do not feed raw egg whites, as a biotin deficiency may occur due to an enzyme in the white part of the egg. The enzyme is destroyed with cooking. Honey may contain bacteria, which may be fatal to the kittens.

Whether using a commercial or homemade formula, only make enough formula for one day of feeding and keep it in the refrigerator. Wash and dry the bottles and nipples or feeding tube thoroughly between feedings. Warm the kitten milk replacer in a pan of water until 98-100ºF before feeding. Mix well before using to decrease the risk of any hot areas of formula.

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3 large or 4 small egg yolks - no whites

The kittens will need to be burped during and after each feeding. Hold them upright or over your shoulder and pat their back. Bottle or tube feeding needs to be done very carefully to prevent aspiration of the supplement with subsequent aspiration pneumonia or drowning. Substitute 2-3 tube feedings a day with bottle feeding to help satisfy the suckling reflex. This should help decrease the kittens' tendency to suck on each other possibly causing sores.

The first 24-48 hours each kitten needs 1 ml of milk per hour. Each day, increase the amount fed per meal by 0.5 ml until a maximum of 10 ml/meal is reached. Kittens will need 9-12 meals per day. During the second week, they should be on 5-7 ml per feeding. By the third week, they should be started on kitten gruel 3 times a day and bottle feeding continued. By the fourth week, they should receive 4-6 bottle feeding a day plus the gruel should be fed 4-5 times a day. The middle of the night feeding can be reduced and then eliminated once they are eating gruel well. They can be completely on solid food by 7 weeks of age. (Caring for Newborn Kittens for the recipe for kitten gruel.) Malnutrition is not uncommon in orphans. Speak with your veterinarian regarding the kittens' diet.

For the first 10 days, weigh the kittens daily at the same time to monitor their weight gain. Then 3-4 times a week for another 10 days. The common first sign of illness is lack of weight gain or weight loss. Each kitten should gain 50-100 grams per week. By 14 days of age, the birth weights should be doubled. In general, if the kittens are not gaining weight, they need more food. If the kittens develop diarrhea, they may be overfed.

Orphan Kitten Feeding Schedule

Weeks Postpartum	Type of Food	Feedings Per Day	Volume of Formula Per Meal	Body Weight
1	KMR	9-12	1-7 ml	100-200 grams
2	KMR	9	7-9 ml	200-300 grams
3	KMR; introduce solids	9	10 ml	300-360 grams
4	KMR; solids	7	10 ml	350-420 grams
5	KMR; decrease KMR in solids	7	8 ml	400-500 grams
6	KMR in bowl; solids	6	*	450-600 grams
7	Wean from KMR	3	*	500-700 grams

Sanitation

A newborn kitten is unable to urinate or have a bowel movement on his own. He lacks the necessary muscle control over these functions. A kitten must be stimulated to urinate and defecate. This duty is normally performed by the mother. Her grooming or licking of the kitten's anal area will stimulate urination and defecation. Orphaned kittens must be manually stimulated by the owner to enable urination and defecation. The kitten must be stimulated after each and every feeding. Fortunately, this is easy. A cotton ball or piece of very soft toweling works well. Moisten it with warm water and gently rub the anal and genital area. Within one to two minutes the kitten will urinate and/or defecate. Some kittens will respond better before eating while others respond better after eating. Try both times to keep the kittens healthiest. Keep a record of each kitten's urination and defecation. Kittens will need to be stimulated in this fashion until their bladder and bowel muscles strengthen, usually by 21 days of age. Most kittens will eliminate on their own by three weeks of age.

Clean the kitten and you are done until the next feeding. Observe the urine and feces for signs of ill health. The urine should be a pale yellow or clear. If it is dark yellow or orange, the kitten is not being fed enough. Do not feed more formula at one

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time, but feed more often. The stool should be a pale to dark brown and partially formed. Green stool indicates an infection, and too firm of a stool indicates not enough formula. Again, if the stool is hard, feed more often rather than increasing the amount of formula given per feeding. It is possible to feed a kitten too much, but not too often. Too much food causes bloating, gas, regurgitation, and sometimes aspiration into the lungs.

Temperature and humidity

To remain healthy, kittens must be kept at the proper room temperature. Young kittens cannot conserve body heat or shiver to create heat. Supplying artificial heat sources such as an incubator, heat lamp, warm water pad, electrical heating pad, or special electrical heated mats designed for newborn pets will help kittens remain at the correct body temperature. Regardless of the heat source, it is very important not to overheat or burn the kittens. Keep a thermometer in the kitten area to monitor the temperature.

A simple 25-watt light bulb suspended over one end of a small box usually will supply sufficient heat. Keep a room thermometer under the light source to monitor the temperature. Heating pads need to be monitored closely if used, as the kittens may be too weakened to move away from them and become burned. If a heating pad must be used, wrap it in a thick towel or sheepskin to protect the kittens from burns.

For the first week, air temperature should be maintained at 85-90° and a relative humidity of 55-65%. Over the next 3 weeks, decrease the temperature to 75°F. Use common sense. If the kittens are piled on top of each other all the time, they are cold. If the kittens are spread far apart, they are too warm. If they lay next to each other, the temperature is fine.

Kittens that are hypothermic (low body temperature) should be warmed slowly over 2-3 hours to a normal newborn temperature of 97°F. A normal body temperature should be obtained before feeding these kittens. Small shampoo bottles filled with hot water, wrapped in a towel, and placed next to the kitten work well and should be changed as needed. The kittens' body temperatures are in the 100-102 degree range by about 4 weeks of age.

Keep the moisture in a range comfortable for humans. In a homemade box area, a towel moistened with water and placed over the box will help add moisture. Never raise infants in a damp or moldy basement area. This type of stagnant dampness is usually cold and invites mildew and respiratory infections. Temperature control is more critical than humidity.

Kittens should be kept on a surface with good traction such as a blanket or sheepskin. This will help with development of their motor skills.

Disease prevention

Many orphaned kittens are at a higher risk of developing infectious diseases such as upper respiratory diseases. This is especially true of kittens that were orphaned without having received any of their natural mother's colostrum. The colostrum, which is produced during the first 24 hours after giving birth, is especially rich in disease-protecting antibodies. Colostrum contains the antibodies, which when consumed by the kittens, provides immunity against many diseases. Kittens that did not nurse from the queen in the first 24 hours have not received colostrum and do not have good immunity. Because of the possible lack of immunity, properly vaccinating the kittens is very important. Some veterinarians may recommend starting orphaned kittens with their first vaccinations at an earlier age.

The American Association of Parasitologists and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have made the following recommendations for deworming kittens:

In kittens, because prenatal infection does not occur, egg excretion begins later than in puppies, and in most areas, the risk of roundworms and hookworms in cats is comparatively lower; deworming for kittens can be started effectively at 3 weeks of age and be repeated at 5, 7, and 9 weeks.

Nurture and socialization

Orphaned or hand-fed kittens should be raised together to aid in social development. They should be petted, cuddled, and played with by humans for 30-40 minutes a day over and above feeding and cleaning time.

Kittens need mental and physical stimulation. If they have littermates, they will stimulate each other when moving. Snuggle with each kitten as you wake her to eat and for a time after eating. They need the nurturing to thrive. Soft stuffed animals put in the box can offer something to snuggle with while sleeping.

It is important for the orphan kitten to have interaction with members of the household at 3-6 weeks of age. Remember, she is still a baby and must be handled with care, but you should start to introduce the kitten to noises, grooming procedures, new people, and pets. Early socialization and enabling the kitten to feel secure in her own environment will help prevent many behavior problems from arising in the future.

Conclusion

Does raising the orphan kitten or litter seem like an enormous task? Do not worry, there are excellent books available for more specific information on orphan care and veterinary care in general. With a commitment of time and care, a little common sense, and some basic information, it can be a very positive

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experience. The happy, healthy young cat you helped raise will be a wonderful reward.

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