



Hand Raising Kittens

Hand raising kittens is not for the faint of heart. Kittens require immense care for the first 4-6 weeks of life. Kittens are fragile and may perish, occasionally making the experience rather heart wrenching. However, raising kittens can also be an incredibly rewarding experience.

Kittens may need to be bottle fed for many reasons. The mother cat may just seem unwilling to care for her litter. A cat that appears unwilling to nurse her kittens requires close attention. She may have complications from pregnancy, birth, or lactation. Some cats seem restless, stay with kittens for only brief periods, or even show aggressive behavior toward the newborns. Often, this unacceptable behavior is a result of environmental disturbances. Placing the mother cat and her litter in a quiet, isolated area may prove beneficial. The mother cat usually remains with her kittens for the first 24 to 48 hours after the birth and nurses them almost continuously. Unfortunately, some mother cats do not tolerate kittens in any environment. The kittens may be abandoned or removed from the mother cat. In other cases, the mother may have passed away.



NEWBORN

When kittens are first born they are completely helpless—their **eyes are closed**, their **ears are folded**, and they can't stand, keep themselves warm, eliminate waste, or eat on their own. They rely on mom for everything!



ONE WEEK

Darling is starting to become **more aware of his surroundings!** At about seven days old, a kitten's ears will unfold and their eyes may start to open.



TWO WEEKS

Look at those blue peepers! Darling's **eyes are fully open**, and he is taking his **first wobbly steps**. Kittens this age start interacting more with each other but still need mom.



THREE WEEKS

Darling's now playing with his siblings and getting more mobile. You should be able to **tell if kittens are boys or girls**. You can start providing a **litter box** and **wet food**.



FOUR WEEKS

Look how much Darling has grown! At four weeks kittens are **sturdy on their feet** and playing with each other, toys, and people.



FIVE WEEKS

Get ready for a lot of fun! Darling is now full of energy and **plays exuberantly**. **Interacting with people** is important for kittens at this age. Darling is developing lots of personality!



SIX WEEKS

Every day Darling is getting more sure of himself through socialization and play. He's **using the litter box** and **eating cat food**—though he still visits mom for snacks and comfort.



If there is another mother cat that has recently given birth, she may accept and nurse orphaned kittens that are similar in size to her own kittens. The greater the age and size differences between orphaned kittens and the foster cat's litter, the less likely she is to accept and nurse them. Use of a foster mother is ideal for raising orphan kittens. If fostering is not an option, bottle feeding kittens is possible and often very successful.

Hand raised kittens should be kept together in a group. They must be kept warm with heating blankets, rice warmies, or light bulbs to provide an ambient temperature of 75-80°F. They should be housed in a clean, warm, protected space like an open top medium sized cardboard box, plastic tub, etc. Blankets should be changed many times each day to keep the kittens clean. The box itself should be cleaned every day.

Kittens can be fed with a stomach tube, from a bottle with a small nipple, or from a syringe with an adapter. Stomach tubes can be used quickly and safely. It is difficult to pass a tube into the trachea because of the kitten's sensitive laryngeal reflex. The tube length from mouth to stomach should be measured, further ensuring correct placement. It should be smooth, properly sized, and placed gently. A stomach tube should only be used if the kittens will not nurse a bottle.

If using a bottle, the opening in the nipple should be close to 1mm in diameter. The kitten should wrap its tongue around the nipple and suction "latch" onto it. The bottle should vent slowly to prevent the kitten from aspirating.

If using a 1mL syringe, allow the kitten to latch onto the syringe to nurse. If it cannot latch, drip the formula into the mouth and allow the kitten to swallow. Be careful to go slowly as they can easily aspirate.

Commercial formula replacements are readily available. Only a kitten formula should be used -this is the closest nutrient content to a mother cat's milk. Do not substitute cow or goat milk. Cats are strict carnivores and have very different milk contents than ruminants. DO NOT use condensed milk as this can cause severe diarrhea and abnormal blood sugar levels. The kitten formula should be warmed to 98-99°F before administration.

The newborn kitten should be fed every 1 to 2 hours. By 4 to 5 weeks of age the kittens can be fed 4 to 6 times per day. They can begin eating soft food and water from a dish. Canned kitten food or kitten kibble soaked in water should be used to introduce kittens to solids.

AGE	0-1 Weeks	1-2 Weeks	2-3 Weeks	3-4 Weeks	4-5 Weeks	5-8 Weeks
WHAT	Kitten formula	Kitten formula	Kitten formula	Kitten formula	Mix of formula/solid	Offer formula mixed with solid
AMOUNT	2-6 ml	6-10 ml	10-14 ml	14-18 ml	18-22 ml	
HOW OFTEN	Bottle feed every 2 hours	Bottle feed every 2-3 hours	Bottle feed every 3-4 hours	Bottle feed every 4-5 hours	Bottle feed every 5-6 hours	Feed every 6 hours

After feeding, it is important to groom kittens with a warm, moist, soft towel to keep them clean and to stimulate urination and defecation.

The most common causes of neonatal death include hypothermia (low temperature), hypoglycemia (low blood sugar), and dehydration.

Kittens commonly contract upper respiratory infections -crusty, goopy eyes and/or noses, sinus congestion, decreased appetite, lethargy, fever. This often needs to be treated with antibiotics. A visit to your veterinarian is usually best for quick resolution and to prevent eye ulcers or pneumonia.

Another common kitten disease is panleukopenia virus (“kitten parvo”). Kittens that have signs of vomiting, diarrhea, and lethargy should be seen by a veterinarian as soon as possible, as they can

Age	Weight
Newborn Kitten	1.8 to 5.3 ounces
1-Week-Old Kitten	5.3 to 8.8 ounces
2-Week-Old Kitten	8.8 to 12.3 ounces
3-Week-Old Kitten	12.3 to 15.9 ounces
4 to 8 Week Old Kitten	1.4 to 2 pounds
9 to 12 Weeks Old Kitten	Around 3 pounds
12 to 16 Weeks Old Kitten	Around 4 pounds
16 to 20 Weeks Old Kitten	5 to 6 pounds
6 Months to Adulthood	6 to 8 pounds



become dehydrated very quickly. Both of these diseases are contagious and can be passed from other cats to the kittens and vice versa.

Kittens should have doubled their birth weight by the second week of life. Their eyes open by 8-10 days of age. At 3 weeks of age, kittens are more active and they learn to urinate and defecate on their own, often some distance from their blankets. Solid food should be supplemented by the fourth week of life and the kittens weaned between 5 and 8 weeks.

Kittens are born with no teeth. Baby teeth start to erupt at 3-4 weeks of age, incisors first then canines, premolars, and last molars. All baby teeth should be present by 8 weeks of age. Baby teeth start to fall out around 12 weeks of age, again starting with the incisors. Adult teeth start erupting at 12-16 weeks of age. All adult teeth have erupted by 6-7 months of age.

Kittens should be treated for roundworms at 4, 6, and 8 weeks of age. Pyrantel is the liquid dewormer recommended by most veterinarians. Vaccinations should be administered by your veterinarian at 8, 12, and 16 weeks of age.