



ORPHAN KITTENS



 A GUIDE TO SAVING THE TINIEST FELINES 

THANK YOU FOR SAVING KITTENS' LIVES!

So, you're going to be caring for an orphan kitten. Maybe you found a kitten outside, or maybe you signed up to foster for your local shelter. In any case, you're officially a lifesaver!

Every year thousands of kittens become separated from their mothers, and are vulnerable on the streets and in animal shelters. Most shelters lack the resources to provide on-site care for orphan kittens, and for this reason they are often euthanized. That's where you come in! Fostering orphans gives them the only chance they have to survive.



YES, YOU CAN DO THIS!

Raising an orphan kitten can sound overwhelming, but don't worry—you can do this! With the right information, supplies, and determination, anyone can save kittens. In this booklet, you'll learn everything you need to know to help the tiniest orphans grow into strong, mighty, adoptable felines!



WHY DO KITTENS BECOME ORPHANED?

Most orphans are born outdoors to free-roaming cats. Often, they are picked up by caring individuals who do not know that the mother is right around the corner. Other times they may be truly orphaned because the mother has become lost, has died, or cannot provide care to the kittens. No one is better at caring for kittens than a mama cat, so if you find a kitten outside, do your best to reunite the whole family before assuming the kitten is orphaned. If no mother returns after waiting 3 hours, it's time for you to step up.



Kittens like Tidbit
can't survive
without our help.

You've got this!

considerations

If you're a first-time foster parent, here are some things you may want to consider:

TIME

Fostering kittens is a short-term commitment; they are adopted out between 8-9 weeks of age, so your time with them will be over before you know it. Be prepared to wake up in the middle of the night when kittens are still bottle feeding. While orphan kittens do require care around-the-clock, their care does not take very long. Just a few minutes of care every few hours can save a life!

SPACE

Fortunately, kittens don't require a lot of space. In fact, for the first three weeks of life, they're content to sleep in a small carrier all day! For more mobile kittens, a small playpen can be set up anywhere—even if you live in a one-bedroom apartment. An ideal space is soft, temperature controlled, sanitizable, and separated from other animals.

PETS AT HOME

For the health, happiness, and safety of all, it's best to keep foster kittens separated from your personal pets. This is easy to do by keeping them in a quarantined space such as a playpen or a small room. You may also consider making sure your cats are up-to-date on vaccines before bringing home unfamiliar animals.

PORTABILITY

Because younger kittens require care every few hours, you may need to take them with you to work or other activities. Assure your workplace that fostering kittens is discreet and non-intrusive, and they'll be much more likely to allow them to stay with you and sleep in a carrier under your desk. If you can't bring them with you, consider asking a friend to co-foster. Having multiple foster parents can make it easier for everyone!

COST OF CARE

When fostering through a local organization, the kitten's care is often covered—you just provide the time, space, and love. Talk to your local organization about what they provide in terms of veterinary care and supplies.



BECOMING ATTACHED

One common concern is *"I'll never be able to say goodbye."* While it's easy to fall in love with kittens, remember that the goal of fostering is to adopt the kittens into a forever home. Rather than feel sad, celebrate your tremendous accomplishment and know that just a few weeks of your care has made a lifelong impact!

Let's save some kittens!

getting ready

Before you foster, make sure you have the right supplies. The following items are suggestions to get you started. These items can typically be found at pet supply stores or online. A full list of recommended supplies with links is available at KittenLady.org/supplies.

KEEP 'EM COZY

- Top-opening carrier (for younger kittens)*
- Micro-fleece baby blankets*
- Heating disc or heating pad*
- Small plush toys*
- Small animal playpen with top (for keeping kittens over 3 weeks)*
- Soft stuffed animal*

KEEP 'EM HEALTHY

- Pen and notepad for monitoring progress*
- Small digital scale (one that measures grams and ounces)*
- High calorie supplement (try NutriCal for Kittens)
- Syringes in various sizes (1cc, 3cc, & 10cc)
- Probiotics (BENE-BAC® PLUS)
- Karo Syrup or Dextrose 50%
- Unflavored Pedialyte or other electrolyte formula

KEEP 'EM FED

- Kitten formula (try PetAg® KMR®)*
- Nursing bottle, extra nipples & a bottle brush*
- 3-6cc oral syringes (for syringe feeding neonates)
- Miracle Nipple (a special attachment)
- Smoothie shaker or mini-whisk (for mixing formula)
- Wet canned food formulated for kittens*
- Shallow food dishes*
- Baby food (turkey or chicken flavor—no onions)

KEEP 'EM CLEAN

- Shallow litter box*
- Non-clumping, unscented litter*
- Tissues, fragrance free baby wipes, & washcloths*
- Cleaning and sanitizing supplies*
- Fragrance free baby soap or dish soap
- Puppy pads

Required items are indicated with an asterisk ()*

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PREPARING YOUR SPACE

Place a warm heating pad in the kitten's carrier or playpen, leaving ample space for the kitten to move away from the heat if desired. Providing a heat source is of utmost importance for kittens 0-4 weeks old. Line the entire space with a soft baby blanket, and provide a stuffed animal as a cuddly companion. Kittens over 3 weeks should have access to a shallow litter pan.

PREPARING YOURSELF

Before you dive in, make sure you have a veterinarian lined up so you know who to call in case of illness. You may also benefit from connecting with other caregivers, even if only online—mentorship changes everything! Connect with the kitten community and you'll always have someone to turn to for support.

Once you're all set up, you're ready to bring home your new foster kittens!

assessing kittens

When you rescue a new kitten, you will want to assess her age and general health, and ensure that you are providing age-appropriate care. Keeping a written log will help you monitor the kitten's growth and progress. Every day, make note of her weight, body condition, and behavior to make sure that she's on track for success!

TEENY TINIES

NEWBORN



- umbilical cord attached, eyes closed, ears folded
- can't regulate body temp.

1 WEEK



- eyes closed, ears folded, no umbilical cord
- eyes open at 8-12 days

2 WEEKS



- eyes completely open, blue color
- wobbly on their feet

TEENY WEANIES

3 WEEKS



- incisors emerging, ears unfolded
- discovering litterbox

4 WEEKS



- canines emerging
- vision improving; walking confidently

5 WEEKS



- premolars emerging
- weaning slowly onto wet kitten food

BIG KIDS CLUB

These social, independent, and coordinated kittens are almost ready for adoption.

6 WEEKS



- all milk (deciduous) teeth have emerged
- eating confidently

7 WEEKS



- transitioning to adult eye color
- coordinated and playful

8 WEEKS



- once 2 pounds, kittens can be spayed/neutered and placed in their forever home!

Remember that some kittens may reach developmental milestones at different ages, and that's okay!

care routine

Once you have a good idea of the kitten's age and weight, you will establish a simple care routine. This routine will be repeated every few hours according to the kitten's age, including overnight:



1. Gently stimulate to pee and poop.
2. Bottle feed.
3. Wipe the kitten down to ensure that the face and genitals are clean.
4. Monitor the kitten's weight and take observational notes.
5. Place the kitten back in their warm and safe space.

Easy peasy!

kitten weight and feeding chart

AGE	WEIGHT	AMOUNT PER FEEDING	SCHEDULE
0-1 week	75-150 grams	2-6 ml	Every 2 hours
1-2 weeks	150-250 grams	6-10 ml	Every 2-3 hours
2-3 weeks	250-350 grams	10-14 ml	Every 3-4 hours
3-4 weeks	350-450 grams	14-18 ml	Every 4-5 hours
4-5 weeks	450-550 grams	18-22 ml	Every 5-6 hours
5-8 weeks	550-850 grams	(weaning; offer ample wet food)	Every 6 hours

You'll notice that as the kitten gets older, the amount increases and frequency decreases. Use your judgment to adjust as necessary; for instance, if a kitten is eating less at each feeding, you may want to increase the frequency. Meet the kittens where they are.

feeding orphan kittens

Unweaned kittens need to be fed with a bottle and kitten formula, which can be purchased at most pet supply stores or online. **Kittens should not be fed cow's milk or milk alternatives.**

Kitten formula is specially formulated to meet their unique needs.

1. Thoroughly mix the powdered kitten formula with warm water according to the product's instructions. Test the temperature on the inside of your wrist; it should be comfortably warm, made fresh every 1-2 feedings, and free of clumps.

2. Cut a small hole into the nipple of the bottle to allow formula to flow. Invert the bottle & fill the nipple with formula. When properly cut, formula should just barely drip out.

3. Hold the kitten in a natural position with the belly facing downward. **Do not hold the kitten like a baby with the belly up**, as this could lead to aspiration.

4. Hold the kitten's head and body steady with your non-dominant hand, placing one finger on the throat to allow you to feel for swallowing. Gently introduce the tip of the nipple into the mouth with the dominant hand.

5. The kitten should roll her tongue like a taco and latch onto the tip of the nipple. Do not flood the mouth with formula; let the kitten drink at her own pace.

6. Allow the kitten to drink until she is full, or until she drinks an acceptable volume based on her weight.



Feed kittens in a natural, belly-down position.

TIPS FOR TRICKY BOTTLE FEEDERS:

- Make sure the flow is correct. If a nipple is too small or big, the kitten may not get a good latch.
- Make sure the formula is a comfortable temperature and has no clumps.
- Try gently holding the head in place and covering one eye. This helps the kitten focus and provides the comforting feeling of being nuzzled into their mother's belly.
- If a kitten is being fussy, you can try gently wrapping her in a blanket while feeding.
- Don't be discouraged if it takes you a while to become comfortable with bottle feeding—take it slow and remember to be patient with their tiny bodies.

Aspiration occurs when a kitten inhales formula into the lungs, which can lead to respiratory distress, pneumonia, and even death. To prevent aspiration, feed in the proper posture, and never squeeze formula forcefully down a kitten's throat. If aspiration does happen, stop feeding and help the kitten sneeze out the formula. Consult a vet immediately if respiratory symptoms arise.

bathroom business

Neonatal kittens under 4 weeks old must be stimulated to go to the bathroom. Mama cats will use their tongues to lick the kittens' genitals, stimulating them to urinate or defecate, and to keep them clean.

As a foster parent, you'll need to replicate this behavior with a soft, absorbent material like tissues, toilet paper, or baby wipes. Gently rub the kitten's genitals in a circular motion, continuing to do so until they are completely finished. Kittens should pee at every feeding, but may poop only once or twice a day. Stimulate kittens at every feeding cycle, and make sure you keep the area clean to avoid scalding and bacterial buildup on their sensitive skin.

WHAT DOES HEALTHY POOP LOOK LIKE?

Healthy bottle baby poop will be mustard yellow in color, and will change to brown as they wean. Good kitten poop should have a solid form—if it looks the shape of a miniature cat poop, it's a good poop!

It sounds gross, but poop is an incredibly important indicator of the health of the kitten, so monitor it closely. The color, form, frequency, & even smell can all be signs of disease, parasites, or other health problems. Collect a stool sample and take to a vet for a fecal analysis if concerned.



Gently stimulate kittens at every feeding.

DIARRHEA DANGERS

Diarrhea is very serious, and can be fatal for neonatal kittens. Diarrhea can be brought on by parasites, viruses, infections, change in diet, stress, or many other causes.

- Seek diagnostic support from a vet so that you can treat the cause of the diarrhea. Always ensure kitten is fully treated for parasites.
- Try adding a probiotic such as BENE-BAC® PLUS to their bottle or wet food.
- Add flavorless Pedialyte to food to keep them hydrated.
- If diarrhea continues for multiple days, consult a vet. They can prescribe small doses of drugs to help stop the diarrhea, and subcutaneous fluids that contain electrolytes & proteins and can help save the kitten.

LITTER TRAINING

Around 3 weeks of age, introduce a shallow litter pan with a fragrance-free, non-clumping litter. Place the kitten in the pan frequently to help them remember to use it. It may help to stimulate them over the litter pan while they are learning. Kittens naturally understand the litter box, but it's up to you to make sure it's kitten-safe and easy to access.

veterinary care

Due to their compromised immune systems, orphan kittens are often medically vulnerable. Be prepared to work with a veterinarian who can provide both routine and emergency care, and seek help if concerns arise.

STANDARD ROUTINE CARE FOR KITTENS

FVRCP vaccine keeps kittens safe from common feline viruses, and can be given at 4-6 weeks of age, and boosted in 2-3 week intervals.

Dewormer will protect the kitten from common internal parasites, and should be dosed to the kitten's weight and given at 2, 4, and 6 weeks of age.

Spay/Neuter surgery should occur before adoption, and can be performed at 8 weeks of age and at 2 pounds.

Rabies vaccine is given at 12-16 weeks of age.

NO FLEAS, PLEASE!

Kittens should be treated if fleas or flea dirt are present. Chemical treatments can be very dangerous for kittens under 8 weeks old; a gentle bath with fragrance-free dish soap is instead recommended.

- Run the tap water until it is a comfortably warm.
- Make a ring of soap around the neck to trap the fleas beneath.
- Gently wash from the neck down. Avoid washing the face, which should be manually spot-cleaned to avoid harming the kitten. Rinse with warm water.
- Immediately towel dry, and use a hairdryer on low heat (at a distance of ~2 feet) to completely dry the kitten and keep her warm.

COMMON AILMENTS

Kittens can exhibit a number of health concerns; always consult a vet if concerning symptoms arise. A minimum quarantine of 12-14 days is recommended to prevent disease transmission between animals.

Upper Respiratory Issues: Symptoms include sneezing, ocular and nasal discharge. URIs should be treated immediately with an antibiotic prescribed by a vet. Wipe away discharge and keep affected areas clean, and consider using a steamy bathroom or nebulizer to help break up congestion. Crusty, inflamed eyes should be kept clean with a warm, wet compress, and treated with an ophthalmic antibiotic.

GI Issues: Kittens are very susceptible to a variety of stomach issues, from internal parasites to malabsorption. While the most common worms are treated through your routine dewormer, some kittens have additional internal parasites such as coccidia or tapeworms. Consult a vet for diagnostic testing and medication, and support with a probiotic as needed.

Skin Issues: Kittens have sensitive skin, which can be prone to irritation and infection. Scalding from urine or fecal matter can make the skin near the genitals a raw red color. Irritation should be kept clean with warm water, and protected with a topical zinc-free cream. If the kitten has other skin concerns such as bald patches or lesions, seek support from a vet.

EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

Kittens can face sudden health emergencies, and it's up to us to recognize the signs in time to save them. If you observe these emergency behaviors, don't delay. Take the kitten to the vet immediately.

EMERGENCY SYMPTOMS:

- Hypothermia/hyperthermia
- Agonal breathing (gasping, open-mouth panting)
- Bleeding
- Refusal to eat for multiple feedings
- Pale gums (Karo syrup or Dextrose 50% on the gums can give a temporary boost to blood sugar)
- Extreme lethargy
- Odd vocalizations (cries of pain)
- Muscle wasting (loss of muscle tone in the face and body, causing the kitten to look gaunt or frail)
- Dehydration (subcutaneous fluids are a lifesaver!)

growing up

WEANING

At 5 weeks of age, kittens are ready to be introduced to solid foods. At each meal, introduce small bites of wet kitten food or slurry—a smooth mixture of formula and wet food—on a finger or spoon. The kitten will soon learn to enjoy this food from a shallow dish. **Always supplement meals with a bottle of formula until the kitten is able to eat a full meal independently.** During this transition you can also introduce a shallow dish of water. Note that weaning is a process of several days, and should not be rushed.

SOCIALIZING

Behavioral health is just as important as physical health, so help them learn the right social behaviors with lots of positive playtime, especially at the key developmental ages of 3-7 weeks. Frequent, positive interaction with different humans will help them become trusting companions. Offer plenty of enrichment and hands-on playtime with toys!

FINDING A HOME

Give your kittens the best chance at a perfect home by sharing crisp, bright images and a positive, uplifting biography on adoption agency websites, local listservs, or even old-fashioned flyers. Photos should be naturally lit, in focus, and on eye-level with the kitten; get the kitten to connect with the camera by making noise and shaking toys just behind the lens. Accompany photos with a biography summarizing the kitten's most aww-worthy traits, and you'll be up to your ears in adoption applications!

Whether you're working through an adoption agency's process, or adopting out kittens on your own, you want to make sure they're getting a great home. Ensure that adopters are prepared to make a ~20 year commitment, and that they will treat the cat with humane and loving care. Adopt littermates in pairs whenever possible, as they do better with a buddy!

SAYING GOODBYE

If you're like most people, by the time your kitten reaches 8 weeks old, you'll have fallen completely in love—but now it's time to say goodbye! At 8 weeks old, healthy 2 pound kittens can be spayed or neutered and adopted. Remember that **goodbye is the goal of fostering**, and that your care has given this kitten an incredible opportunity to live a long and full life in a forever home. Beautiful work!



taking care of kittens...and yourself!

It's like an airplane safety announcement: "put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others." If you're going to be responsible for saving lives, you have to first take care of yourself.

COMPASSION FATIGUE

Caring for vulnerable animals can be both rewarding and challenging. Compassion fatigue is a form of secondary traumatic stress caused by the emotional strain of caring for unhealthy animals. The intensity of 24/7 care and extreme feelings of empathy can lead to both mental and physical exhaustion. If you're feeling overwhelmed or distressed, please seek support. Know that it is okay to ask for help and to take a break after fostering. The kittens need you in one piece!

SELF-CARE IS IMPORTANT!

- Eat healthy food, drink lots of water, take care of your body, and get as much sleep as you can—even if you're waking up intermittently to feed.
- Find support and mentorship by engaging in local and online communities of kitten caregivers. Having a network of support is key.
- Stay active with your other hobbies. Fostering kittens is amazing, but it is not the only thing that defines you. Having other passions and friends who have nothing to do with animal care will help you recharge.

Most importantly, remember that...

YOU ARE AMAZING!

You are literally a life-saving superhero! Never forget what a profound impact you make by standing up for someone who is vulnerable. Feel proud of your incredible, brave, lifesaving work, and celebrate your awesomeness. You are amazing and you are changing the world.





Kitten Lady is on a mission to change the world for the tiniest and most vulnerable felines. Kitten Lady reaches countless caring individuals across the globe with educational media containing inspiring and lifesaving information, and collaborates with shelters to advance protections and programs for kittens.

Learn more about kitten care in *Tiny But Mighty: Kitten Lady's Guide to Saving the Most Vulnerable Felines*.

Find more information and instructional videos at KittenLady.org.

JOIN THE COMMUNITY!

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