

Raising your Foster Kittens from Birth to Surgery



Foster homes are needed to provide nursing mothers a safe, warm environment in which they can raise their young. In this type of situation, foster volunteers closely monitor the progress of the litter, but for the first few weeks momma usually does most of the work. Foster homes also provide attention and socialization to the adult animal and the growing babies. Occasionally, kittens are orphaned and need to be bottle fed and hand-reared by humans.

This section is going to review the basic rearing information of kittens from birth to 16 weeks.

QUARANTINE

Kittens that have been brought to us are a high disease risk for contagious disease. Kittens are in foster homes for socialization and medical observation for a minimum of two weeks. Please do not allow quarantine kittens to visit public areas during quarantine. They should not come into contact with other cats, except the foster volunteer's own fully vaccinated cats. There is a higher incidence of disease being spread to and from these immune-compromised animals.

Facilities needed:

An easy-to-clean area separated from your own companion animals, yet not isolated from normal activities. Examples are a bathroom, spare bedroom, heated laundry room or kitchen.

Infant Development and Socializing Kittens

A great amount of time and effort is required to properly socialize Kittens between the ages of 4 to 12 weeks. Daily socialization sessions are important in shaping the foster kitten's future personality and emotional growth.



Neonates:

Neonatal kittens should have pink toes/gums, a firm solid body, plump and generally healthy in appearance.

Respiration-Neonates breathe 25-35 times per minute. Their heart rate is greater than 200 beats per minute until they are 2 weeks old.

Temperature-Normal rectal temperature for newborns is 96 – 97 F.

Eyes and Ears-Closed, but can still hear (poorly) and respond to bright light with a blink reflex.

Muscles-Flexor muscles are stronger than the extensor muscles. Healthy kittens will curl their bodies and limbs inward.

At this time, mom and kits should be kept in a birthing box or crate. Small blankets with no holes, or towels, should line the interior of the box or crate. Kittens this age cannot regulate their body temperature, so please make sure the room is warm and comfortable for them.

Fun fact! Newborn kittens can purr and hiss!

Kittens 1 to 2 weeks:

Kittens should still be in the birthing box or crate with mom.

Temperature-Normal rectal temperature has gradually increased to 100 F.

Eyes and Ears-Open at approximately 11-15 days.

Muscles-Extensor muscles begin to develop. They can use their front legs to stand and walk shakily.

Neuromuscular-Withdrawal to pain stimuli is noticed.

What you can do -It is important that the area where the babies are kept is warm and smooth, so that the area around their umbilical cord does not become infected. You can do gentle handling and cuddling at this point. These sessions should be very short (1-2 minutes) and great care should be taken in the handling process.

- 1) Briefly, rock the baby back and forth.
- 2) Rub the coat briskly with your hands, and gently finger the webbing in between the toes.
Rub ears and muzzle, touch tails.
- 3) Invert the baby so it is facing the ceiling and gently rock back and forth, up and down.



2 to 3 weeks:

Vision - Poor even after the eyes open, but continues to develop until 3 to 4 weeks of age. If the eyes fail to open and the lids look sticky, the lids should be very gently wiped with dampened cotton and a little petroleum jelly smeared on them to ease their opening. **The eyelids should never be pulled apart.** If the eyes still haven't opened by 14 days contact your Foster Coordinator.

Muscles -The rear legs can now support the body. Kittens begin crawling and quickly become very active.

Temperature - Able to maintain body temperature within the normal range (100.5 F-102.5 F).

Teeth - Deciduous incisors erupt at 3 weeks, followed by deciduous canines.

Sometimes around this age, you may notice the mother wants to be away a little bit more often. Monitor kittens' weight closely during this time.

You may be removing the kittens from the birthing box or moving to a bigger crate at this point if they are able to escape.

What you can do - Be careful not to startle the kittens with sudden movements or loud sounds. Do not overwhelm the baby at this point. Place a human-scented T-shirt in the sleeping area every day. The den area should have 2 surfaces, one for sleeping and the other for activity, litterbox and feeding.

Provide 5 minutes of handling exercises in order to stimulate and not to scare the kitten.

- 1) Gently roll the infant over on its back for 10-15 seconds, and then draw the kitten close to you, stroking and cuddling it.
- 2) Softly pinch in between the toes and then draw the animal close to you, stroking and cuddling the kitten.
- 3) Grooming-Softly and gently brush the kitten's coat a few strokes, touch the ears and mouth and **clip nails**.



3 to 4 weeks:

Muscles—the extensor muscles become dominant. By 21 days, kittens can walk with a fairly steady gait and even climb! Kittens can sit and have reasonable control of toes.

Eyes and Ears - Vision and hearing are normal. Blink response disappears, due to the development of accurate pupil control. The infant is now able to use visual clues to locate and approach the mother. Ears should be completely open by 17 days.

Respiration-Slows to 15-25 breaths per minute

Teeth-Deciduous incisors and canine teeth erupt.

What you can do- Do not permanently remove the infant animal from its mother or littermates at this time. It is critical to the kitten's development that it continues with its social interaction.

- 1) Be careful not to frighten the kitten - it is experiencing a shower of sensory stimulation and a frightening experience could make a life-long impression.
- 2) It is important to provide a stable home environment to balance the excess stimulation the kitten is experiencing.
- 3) The kittens will start to investigate their immediate environment. Safe, simple toys can be added for them to discover at this time. Try toys with different textures and sounds
- 4) The babies can be introduced to people at this time, but this should be carefully controlled and limited to family members and close friends. The interaction should be limited to 5 minutes of gentle massage and time spent cuddling.
- 5) The main caretaker should continue grooming and handling exercises: holding, cuddling.



4 to 5 weeks:

Teeth-Deciduous premolars erupt

Muscular - Kittens are walking normally and climbing everything, including you. Social play is prevalent.

Eyes and Ears-Guided paw-placing and obstacle avoidance develop between 3 to 5 weeks. Vision is markedly improved.



5 to 8 weeks:

Teeth-Entire set of deciduous teeth by 5 weeks

Eyes-Eye color is determined by 6 weeks

Postural reactions-Fully developed at 6 to 8 weeks.

Adult sleep patterns-Developed by 7 to 8 weeks of age

Temperature-Normal range is 100.5 F to 102.5 F

Play-Play with objects and locomotor play rise markedly around 7 to 8 weeks of age

What you can do-The kittens are totally dependent on the environment you provide for stimulation and development.

- 1) Introduce the kittens to as many different people as possible-people of different shapes, sizes, colors, sexes and ages. Also introduce the kitten to other fully vaccinated animals that live in your home. Allow supervised visits for about five minutes. These visits should be calm and pleasant as a traumatic incident at this stage could have a long lasting effect.
- 2) Continue to add appropriate toys to the kitten's environment.
- 3) Expose the kittens to mild sounds.
- 4) Expose the kittens to different areas and surfaces, allowing it to investigate.
- 5) The main caregiver continues handling and grooming exercise.



8 weeks plus:

Teeth—Change from deciduous (milk) teeth to adult teeth starts at about 3 ½ months.

What you can do—Protect the kittens from things that could have a lasting effect during the fear period.

- 1.) Introductions to people are extremely important, as the kitten develops the ability to form permanent relationships with humans at this time. Supervise the visit, but expose the kitten to as many different types of people as possible.
- 2.) The kitten's environment should develop a sense of security in the animal.
- 3.) There should be mild restrictions imposed on the kitten to help it better develop proper tolerance levels.
- 4.) Introduce the kitten to louder noises gradually, such as a vacuum cleaner, washing machine and/or dishwasher. Play with the kitten as you introduce the noise in the background.

Encourage kittens to explore, sniff, and lick these noisemakers. Exposing kittens to a variety of unusual sounds helps them become accustomed to these noises. It will also minimize fearful, nervous reactions to noises later in life.



Pre-Adolescent - 13-16 weeks:

General behavior- Kittens are fully developed, needing only experience. The kitten's mind can still be influenced. The animal's flight instinct is developing and may cause it to run from real or imagined threats.

What you can do– Be consistent with rules and routine, continue grooming and socialization. Cats can even learn tricks! Try this to work your kitten's brain.

Surgery!

If your kittens were born in your home, or have been there since they were 6 weeks or younger, they should be coming in for surgery when they reach 8 weeks of age. Surgery is usually scheduled about a week ahead of time. You'll be notified of the day and time. You are responsible for getting your foster to Tails for this. If you are dropping off the day of surgery, you will need to make sure that your foster has **no access to food after 10pm the day prior to surgery.**

If you received your kittens into your care after they were 6 weeks of age, you will have them with you for **a minimum of 2 weeks** while they complete their quarantine period.

Weaning and Feeding Kittens

Generally, it is best to start weaning Kittens at 3 to 5 weeks of age. Weaning time depends upon the size of the litter, the condition of the mother, and the availability of mother's milk. Weaning should be a gradual process.

How to Wean:

Begin introducing 3 to 5 week-old kittens to semi-solid "gruel", made from 1-part canned food to 3 parts hot water. You can also soak dry kibble in warm water to make it palatable for gruel kittens. Make sure to serve the food at body temperature, (98 to 100 F). Offer this mixture 3 to 4 times daily depending on the age of the kitten. Remove any uneaten gruel after about 15 minutes and discard.

Mash the moistened food well with a fork, or puree the mixture in a blender. Place the thick gruel in a shallow pan, (pie tins work well). Feeding kittens in the bathtub helps ease the clean-up process when weaning kittens off the bottle.

Introducing Food:

The mother cat will usually show her kittens how to eat gruel and solid foods, and drink water. Feed the mother cat before offering gruel to her babies or she will eat it all.

Dip your finger into the gruel and let the kitten lick at it, or smear a small amount on the kitten's lips or on the roof of his mouth. Be careful not to get any of the gruel in the kitten's nose. You can even try rubbing the gruel on the kitten's feet, as it will instinctively try and clean itself.

At around 5 weeks of age, the young kittens should be reducing their intake of mother's milk and consuming more gruel. Once they are consistently eating gruel, gradually decrease the amount of water used. All changes in amounts and consistency of food should be done gradually to promote proper digestion.

Always provide plenty of fresh water in clean bowls.

Some kittens take longer to acclimate to supplemental feedings. It is important to always watch the litter to ensure that each individual is eating healthy amounts of food. Check tummies for fullness after they have eaten.

4-6 weeks-Gruel 3 times a day.

6-8 weeks– Mix canned food and moistened dry food to begin their transition to dry food. Feed this mixture twice a day.

Mastitis:

Mastitis is inflammation involving one or more of the mother cat's mammary glands (teats). Mastitis usually presents 6 weeks after giving birth, if it is going to present at all. **If you suspect Mastitis contact your Foster Coordinator.**

Symptoms of mastitis include fever, listlessness, loss of appetite, and neglect of the young. Affected mammary glands are usually swollen, hot and painful to the touch. You can feel firm nodules within the tissue of the teat.

The cause can be from a bacterial infection in the mammary gland and may require antibiotic treatment. If the cat will tolerate it, hot-packing the affected glands will encourage drainage.