



ORPHAN KITTENS



THANK YOU FOR SAVING KITTENS' LIVES!

Welcome to the wonderful world of kitten caregiving! 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!

Over a million kittens enter shelters each year. 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 gives kittens the very best chance to survive.



YES, YOU CAN DO THIS!

Raising an orphan kitten may sound overwhelming. But that's just because it's unfamiliar, not because you can't do it. 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 mighty, adoptable felines.



HOW DO KITTENS BECOME ORPHANED?

Most orphan kittens 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 proper care to the kittens. If a kitten is in good condition, assume that the mother is nearby and attempt to keep the family together. If a kitten is in bad condition or confirmed to be an orphan, you'll need to step in and help.

Tip: *If you've found a kitten, make sure the neighborhood cats get spayed and neutered!*

Baby kittens 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 around 8 weeks of age, so your time with them will be over before you know it. While young bottle baby 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 carrier all day! For mobile kittens, a small playpen can be set up anywhere—even in an apartment. An ideal space is soft, temperature controlled, easily disinfected, 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 resident animals. Opt for a quarantined space such as a playpen or a small room. Make sure your cats are up to date on preventive care before bringing home unfamiliar animals, and wash hands before and after interacting with new fosters.

COST OF CARE

When fostering through a shelter or rescue 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, remember that the purpose of fostering kittens is to help them survive until they are old enough for adoption. Once they're adopted, celebrate your tremendous accomplishment and know that just a few weeks of your care has made a lifelong impact! With each goodbye, you'll have room in your home to help another kitten in need.

Goodbye is the goal!



Let's save some kittens!

Getting Ready

Kitten care supplies can be found at pet supply stores, online, or may be provided by your local shelter or rescue. A full list of recommended supplies with links is available at [KittenLady.org/supplies](https://www.kittenlady.org/supplies).

KEEP 'EM COZY

- Top-opening carrier or bin
- Small animal playpen
- Micro-fleece baby blankets
- Heating disk or pad
- Small plush toys and stuffed animal

KEEP 'EM HEALTHY

- Pen and notepad for monitoring progress
- Small digital scale (that measures in grams)
- Syringes in various sizes (1cc, 5cc & 10cc)
- High calorie supplement and probiotics
- Thermometer and flea comb

KEEP 'EM FED

- Kitten formula (opt for a powder formula)
- Wet and dry food formulated for kittens
- Nursing bottle & bottle cleaning brush
- Kitten nipple attachment
- Smoothie shaker or mini whisk
- Shallow food dishes

KEEP 'EM CLEAN

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

PREPARING YOUR SPACE

Under 3 weeks: Kittens can be housed in a well-ventilated carrier, box or bin containing a heat pad, blanket, and stuffed animal. Providing a heat source is essential. Use a comfortably warm heating pad and cover it with a soft blanket, leaving ample room for the kitten to move away from the heat as desired.

Over 3 weeks: Kittens can be housed in a playpen or small room, and should have access to a shallow litter pan, bedding, and toys. Food and water dishes should be accessible at all times once weaned.

PREPARING YOURSELF

Before you dive in, make sure you're signed up to foster with a shelter or rescue who can provide access to veterinary care and support. If fostering independently, a relationship with a vet is essential.

You'll also benefit from training resources! Whether you prefer books, articles, webinars or videos, you'll find tons of information on kitten care at [KittenLady.org](https://www.kittenlady.org).

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

Kitten Development

When you rescue a new kitten, you'll want to assess her age and general health to 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!

NEWBORN



- Eyes closed, ear canals shut
- No teeth, umbilical cord present until ~5 days

1 WEEK



- Eyes closed; begin opening at 8-12 days
- No teeth, no umbilical cord

2 WEEKS



- Eyes completely open; pupils large, irises blue
- No teeth, ears small and rounded

3 WEEKS



- Incisors emerging, ears upright
- Discovering litterbox, toddling slowly

4 WEEKS



- Canines emerging, ears pointy and large
- Vision improving, walking confidently

5 WEEKS



- Premolars emerging, ears proportionate
- Weaning gradually onto wet kitten food

6 WEEKS



- All deciduous teeth have emerged
- Transitioning to adult eye color

7 WEEKS



- Coordinated, playful and active
- Adult eye color has transitioned

8 WEEKS



- Once 2 pounds, kittens can be spayed/neutered and adopted into a loving 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'll 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. Write down the weight in grams and 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	550-950 grams	weaning; offer ample wet food	Every 6 hours

Notice that as the kitten gets older, the feeding amount increases and the frequency decreases. Monitor their weight closely to ensure they're steadily gaining, and adjust as necessary. Meet the kittens where they are!

Feeding

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. If using a nipple with no hole, make a small cut that allows formula to just barely drip out when the bottle is inverted. *Note that it is significantly safer to use a nipple manufactured with a small hole.*
3. Place the kitten in a natural position with the belly facing downward.
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.
5. Invert the bottle, allowing one drop of formula to exit the nipple. The kitten should roll her tongue and latch onto the tip. 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 the nipple hole is too small or big, it can be ineffective and even dangerous.
- 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 the mother's belly.
- Offer the kitten her bottle right after waking, in a cozy bed.
- For fussy kittens, try gently wrapping 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 death. To prevent aspiration, feed in the proper posture, use a nipple attachment that doesn't require cutting, and never squeeze the bottle forcefully. If aspiration occurs, 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, prompting them to urinate or defecate, and keeping them nice and clean.

As a foster parent, you'll need to stimulate the kitten with a soft, absorbent material such as tissues or toilet paper. Gently rub the kitten's genitals in a circular motion, continuing to do so until they have finished. Kittens should pee at every feeding, but may poop only once or twice a day. Stimulate kittens at each feeding cycle, and keep the area clean with a baby wipe 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 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 and frequency can all be signs of a health problem. Collect a stool sample and take to a vet for a fecal analysis if concerned.

DIARRHEA DANGERS

Diarrhea can be fatal for neonatal kittens and should be taken seriously. It's important to speak up quickly when you see diarrhea, and to address the life-threatening side effect of dehydration.

- Prevent diarrhea by keeping food fresh and stored in the refrigerator, practicing good hand hygiene, washing bottles and dishes, weaning gradually, and ensuring kittens are treated for common parasites.
- Seek diagnostic support from a vet; diarrhea has many causes such as parasites, viruses, and bacterial imbalances, and each require specific treatment.
- Address dehydration by providing additional fluid and electrolytes. Ask a vet or foster coordinator about subcutaneous fluids to help the kitten stay hydrated.
- Consider adding a prebiotic or probiotic to support the gut, and a high-calorie supplement if struggling to gain weight.

LITTER TRAINING

Between 3-4 weeks of age, introduce a shallow litter box with a fragrance-free, non-clumping litter. Place the kitten in the box frequently. Kittens naturally understand the litter box, but it's up to you to make sure it's kitten-safe and easy to access.



Gently stimulate kittens at every feeding.

Veterinary Care

Due to their underdeveloped immune systems, kittens are medically vulnerable and can decline rapidly when sick. Your job isn't to know how to treat them—it's to monitor closely and see a vet if symptoms arise."

DISEASE PREVENTION

Quarantine for 14 days and wash hands to reduce disease spread.

Disinfect your environment and practice good **food safety**.

Monitor weight, stool, condition and behavior and **speak up** if concerned.

COMMON AILMENTS

Upper Respiratory Issues: Sneezing, ocular and nasal discharge are symptoms of a respiratory infection, which can worsen quickly without treatment. Keep the affected areas clean, use a steamy bathroom or nebulizer to break up congestion, and provide medication as prescribed. Crusty eyes can be warm compressed and treated with an ophthalmic antibiotic. Kittens showing distress or signs of pneumonia should be taken to a vet right away.

Skin Issues: Kittens' sensitive skin is prone to irritation and infection. If scalding is seen around the genitals and butt, keep the area clean with warm, soapy water and soothe with a topical zinc-free cream. If bald patches or lesions are seen on the skin, seek support from a vet. If black specks are visible, fleas may be present.

GI Issues: Kittens are susceptible to gut health issues, from parasites to bacterial infections. Ensure the kitten is receiving appropriate preventive care and nutrition for their life stage, and consult a vet about loose stool or constipation. If seeing nausea or liquid diarrhea, go immediately to a vet.

Bacterial Infections: The most common cause of death in kittens is sepsis—a systemic infection. If seeing signs of decline like lethargy, fever, low temperature, inappetence, weight loss, or general failure to thrive, see a vet *now* for medication and supportive care.

NO FLEAS, PLEASE!

If fleas or flea dirt are present, a gentle bath with fragrance-free baby shampoo or dish soap is effective and safe. Avoid topical treatments that aren't labeled for young kittens.

- Run the tap water until it is comfortably warm.
- Make a ring of soap around the neck to trap fleas.
- Gently bathe from the neck down. Avoid washing the face, which should be manually spot cleaned. Rinse with warm water.
- Towel dry and return the kitten to a warm bed.

PREVENTIVE CARE

FVRCP vaccine keeps kittens safe from common feline viruses.

Dewormer protects kittens from common internal parasites.

Spay/neuter surgery prevents future litters and occurs before adoption.

EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

Take a kitten to the vet **immediately** if you see:

- Hypothermia/hyperthermia
- Agonal breathing (gaspings, panting)
- Bleeding or injury
- Pale gums
- Lethargy
- Odd vocalizations
- Refusal to eat/weight loss for several feedings
- Vomiting or liquid diarrhea

Growing Up

KITTEN-LED WEANING

At 5 weeks old, kittens are ready to be introduced to solid foods. Weaning is a process of several days and should not be rushed. At each meal, introduce small bites of wet kitten food on a finger or spoon. Soon, the kitten will learn to enjoy this food from a shallow dish.

Monitor closely and weigh throughout the process to ensure that the kitten is successfully eating independently. **Always supplement meals with a bottle until the kitten is completely weaned.** During this transition you can also introduce a shallow dish of water and dry food.



Once the kitten is weaned, provide wet food at least 3 times daily, and access to dry food and water at all times.

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 3-8 weeks. Frequent, positive interaction with humans will help them become trusting companions. Offer plenty of enrichment and hands-on playtime with toys!

FINDING A HOME

If you're working with a shelter or rescue, they'll guide you on the process for finding an adopter. Help prospective adopters find your kittens by sharing crisp, bright images and an uplifting biography on the adoption website, social media, or even old-fashioned flyers. Adopt littermates in pairs or look for homes with another cat whenever possible, as kittens do best with a buddy!

SAYING GOODBYE

Once your kitten reaches 2 months and 2 pounds, it's time to 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 loving home. Beautiful work!

Bonus: saying goodbye helps save the next foster kitten a spot, so you can save even more lives!



Caring for the Caregiver

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 must also prioritize caring for yourself.

COMPASSION RESILIENCE

Fostering kittens is deeply rewarding, but caring for vulnerable animals can also be emotionally challenging and physically exhausting. Know that it's okay to ask for help, take breaks, and speak up when you need support. The kittens need you in one piece!

- 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 mentorship by engaging in local and online communities of kitten caregivers. Having a network of support is key.
- Know your capacity. As you're asked to do more, consider your inner bandwidth, not just the space in your home. Saying "no" sometimes is okay, can help you protect your ability to say "yes" in the future.
- Stay active with your other hobbies. Fostering kittens is amazing, but it is not the only thing that defines you. Having other passions will help you recharge.
- Celebrate your wins! Whether you keep a photo album or throw an adoption day ice cream party, do something to celebrate when your kittens get adopted.

Most importantly, remember that...



**YOU ARE
AMAZING!**

You are a kitten superhero! Never forget what a profound difference you make by giving babies a chance to thrive. Feel proud of your compassionate actions—and celebrate your lifesaving impact.

Kitten Lady provides educational resources to help shelters and individuals save the lives of neonatal kittens. Learn more about kitten care in *Tiny But Mighty: Kitten Lady's Guide to Saving the Most Vulnerable Felines*.

Find articles, webinars and instructional videos at KittenLady.org.



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