

## Hand rearing kittens

### Overview

- Hand rearing kittens can be very rewarding but is also a big commitment.
- It involves keeping the kittens warm, regular feeding, toileting, cleaning, health monitoring and socialisation.
- Contact your veterinary practice for advice before deciding to hand rear a litter of kittens.
- Contact your vet ASAP if you notice that your kittens aren't thriving, or you're worried about their health.

### Newborn kitten care



Hand rearing can be a very rewarding process but there is no getting around the fact that it's hard work. Before taking on the responsibility, it's important you consider exactly what is required and whether you'll be able to do it. Always speak to your veterinary practice for advice. This article covers:

- **Warmth**
- **Feeding**
- **Toileting**

- **Cleaning**
- **Weighing**
- **Problems and FAQ's**
- **'Health care and socialisation' is covered in our 'Complete Guide to Newborn Kitten Care'.**

## Warmth

Kittens can't regulate their own body temperature, and without a mother they are likely to get cold. Keep them in warm environment, with a cosy bed, heat pads or a heat lamp. If using heat pads, make sure there's plenty of padding between them and the pad to prevent burns. If using a heat lamp, make sure it's not so close to burn them and follow the safety guidelines carefully. For the first week to ten days your kittens need to be kept between 29° - 32°C, this can be gradually reduced to room temperature (around 21°C) over a period of 4-6 weeks. A large cardboard box containing soft bedding makes a great bed for newborn kittens. **It's very important to give your kittens an area big enough for them to move away from the heat if they need to.**

## Feeding your newborn kittens

### What to feed your kittens

Newborn kittens need artificial milk formula specifically for kittens; this is available from most vets and reputable pet shops. Kitten/puppy milk from the supermarket is not suitable. Cow's milk is also unsuitable.

### Things you'll need

- Artificial milk formula specifically for kittens (available from vets or good pet shops)
- A kitten feeding kit (available from vets and good pet shops)
- Sterilising tablets or solution (from any chemist)

- Cotton wool
- 2ml Syringes
- Weighing scales

### When and how much to feed

Your milk formula packaging will have an instruction chart that tells you how much, and how regularly to feed. Up to 2 weeks old, your kittens will need feeding approximately 2mls of milk every two hours, including through the night. Once they are 3 weeks, you can extend the time between milk feeds to 3 hours. At 4 weeks, you can start to introduce kitten food, but they'll still need their 3 hourly milk feeds. At 5 weeks, they will be eating much more kitten food and drinking fresh water, you can start offering their milk on a saucer - any kittens eating a bit less may need a top up milk feed throughout the day. By 6-7 weeks of age, your kittens should be fully weaned off milk, eating kitten food and drinking water. See our rough guide below:

<b>Week 1</b>	Milk feeds every 2 hours
<b>Week 2</b>	Milk feeds every 2 hours
<b>Week 3</b>	Milk feeds every 2 hours
<b>Week 4</b>	Milk feeds every 3 hours, introduce wet, sloppy kitten food
<b>Week 5</b>	Wet kitten food, milk to lap, also fresh water to lap. Top up bottle feeds only if necessary.
<b>Week 6</b>	Wet kitten food and fresh water

### Bottle preparation

It's extremely important to keep your feeding bottles clean; hand reared kittens don't receive normal antibody protection from their mother's milk, which makes them vulnerable to getting ill.

- Wash all bottles and teats after each feed using warm soapy water and a bottlebrush, rinse well.

- Sterilise everything after cleaning using a sterilising solution or tablet (from a chemist). Leave everything in the sterilising solution for the correct time. You don't need to rinse the bottles afterwards, just flick them to shake off any excess.

### **Milk preparation**

Artificial milk formula usually comes as a powder that needs mixing with warm water.

- Wash your hands
- Clean your work surface and collect your clean, sterilised bottles
- Boil some fresh water
- Using a thermometer, allow the water to cool to the correct temperature (find this in the formula milk instructions). The correct temperature allows the milk powder to dissolve properly with no clumps.
- Carefully measure out the powder and the correct amount of water, using a measuring cup or scales. If you use a measuring cup, make sure you level the powder with the flat edge of a knife to ensure you don't put too much in.
- Once the milk is prepared, test it on the underside of your wrist to make sure that it's a comfortable drinking temperature.

### **Bottle feeding**



A long as your kittens have a strong suck, they can be bottle-fed.

- Hold, or put your kitten in a natural feeding position (as if they were feeding from their mother). The natural feeding position for a kitten is on their belly. Feeding a kitten on its back could cause them to breath in the milk.
- Present the bottle teat to them and allow them to suck.
- Give them a break if they try to detach, otherwise let them suck until them seem full.
- If you see any bubbles of milk coming out of your kitten's nose, stop feeding and wipe them clean. This usually indicates that the milk has gone down into the lungs or up into their nose. Wait to make sure they are breathing ok before trying again, a bit slower and in the correct feeding position.

**Tip:** Make sure that there are holes in the end of the bottle teats (some come without!). If the teat you are using has no holes, use a pin to prick a few into the end of it. Milk should come out comfortably with a light suck, if the holes are too small your kittens may swallow air instead of milk, if they are too big the milk may come out too quickly.

### Syringe feeding



If your kitten is struggling to feed from a bottle, you may need to feed them with a syringe until they are strong enough to suck. Syringe feeding has to be done very carefully because your kitten has no control over how much milk they get.

- Use a 1ml or 2m syringe, and ideally a teat attached the end of it.

- Hold your kitten in the position that they would be in if they were feeding from their mother (see above ).
- Drip small amounts of milk onto their tongue and let them swallow it.
- If necessary, encourage your kitten to swallow by gently massaging their throat.
- Be very careful not to force milk into your kitten because they may choke.

## Helping your kittens go to the toilet

Your kittens will need help weeing and pooing until they are approximately 3 weeks old. Normally, their mother would lick them to stimulate them to go to the toilet, so you will need to replicate this using damp cotton wool, after every feed.

- Use warm, damp cotton wool to gently, wipe their bottom and vulva or penis areas in the same way that their mother might lick them.
- Continue until you see them pass urine and/or faeces.
- Wipe them clean afterwards.

## Cleaning your kittens

It's important to keep hand-reared kittens clean, because they aren't receiving antibodies from their mother's milk and will be slightly more vulnerable to infections. Wipe away any spilt milk after feeds and ensure they are clean after toileting. Clean their bedding and living area daily.

## Weighing



From day one, make sure you can identify each kitten individually. Make a record of their birth weight and weigh them every day (at approximately the same time). Your kittens usually weigh around 100g at birth and they should gain weight every day. Contact your vet for advice if any of your kittens lose weight or aren't keeping up with the others.

## Hand rearing problems/when to contact your vet

Hand reared kittens are vulnerable to infections and illness because they don't receive natural antibodies from their mother's milk. It's important to look for signs of:

- Diarrhoea or constipation
- Low energy, being quiet, inactive or weak
- Twitching or having fits
- Not feeding
- Not passing wee or poo
- Feeling cold

Contact your vet for advice if you notice anything wrong with your kittens.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **My newborn kitten seems constipated, what can I do?**

Contact your vet for advice if your kitten isn't pooping normally; constipation is very painful and can be dangerous. Your vet may prescribe stool softeners or administer an enema to help your kitten poo. If you catch it early enough, they may advise replacing their next feed with cooled boiled water (no milk). A water meal is fine as a one-off and can help loosen constipation. The constipation should resolve after treatment, at which point you can continue feeding milk. Constipation in artificially fed kittens is often caused by clumps in their formula milk (that are difficult to digest). Clumps develop when formula powder is mixed with water that is too hot, or too cold. Make sure that you follow your milk preparation instructions carefully to prevent problems.

### **My kittens have diarrhoea, what do I do?**

Diarrhoea in young kittens can be very serious, contact your vet straight away for advice.

### **My kittens are weak, what do I do?**

Weakness in young kittens can indicate serious illness such as low blood sugar. Contact your vet for an emergency appointment.

### **How long can newborn kittens go without eating?**

Newborn kittens need to be fed every 2 hours through day night for the first 3 weeks of their life. Feed frequency can then be slowly reduced until they are fully weaned at 6-7 weeks old. Contact your vet if any of your kittens aren't feeding properly.

### **How much does a newborn kitten weigh?**

Newborn kittens usually weigh around 100 grams. They typically increase in bodyweight by about 5-10% each day over their first 2 weeks of life.

Published: October 2019