

FACTSHEET

Orphan kittens – considerations and care

Young orphaned kittens are very fragile, and raising them can be difficult, time consuming and many times not successful. Sadly, kittens who are found abandoned by their mother often have serious health issues or abnormalities that even a vet cannot detect (including sight, hearing and neurological defects).

It is extremely rare for a mother cat to abandon a kitten unless there is something wrong with them (mother may know best).

However, there is the possibility something has happened to the mother cat (injured/sick). Regardless of the circumstances, if you find an orphan kitten there are many important things to consider BEFORE you decide to take on the responsibility of caring for them. Do you know what is involved? How prepared are you for the possibility the kitten may pass away? Can you afford veterinary attention whenever the need arises? Young orphan kittens need much more than best intentions.

Ideally a kitten should stay with their mother until they are at least 8-10 weeks old. Not only does the mother's milk provide essential nutrients and antibodies that help to ensure a kitten grows up healthy and strong, they learn important socialisation skills only a mother cat and feline siblings can teach them.

Additionally, kittens who have not received colostrum from their mother will have weakened immune systems and are much more susceptible to disease and infection. Colostrum is the first milk produced by the mother after birth. It is very high in protein and antibodies.

Importantly, when you find a kitten you should look around for the mother cat. Mother cats can leave their kittens for short periods of time while they go in search of food, so don't take a kitten away from where you've found them until you're certain the mother cat is not returning. You can tell if a mother cat is still caring for her kittens by the kitten's appearance and state of the nest area. Kittens who are healthy looking and sleeping quietly are most likely being looked after by their mother. Also, the nest area is clean and dry. Kittens who are dirty, crying incessantly and the nest area is soiled indicates they most likely have been abandoned.

In the case where a kitten is in danger of being injured (eg on/near a busy road) remove the kitten from danger and try to locate the mother cat before you take the kitten away. If the mother cat cannot be found, the next step is to take the kitten to a vet for a health-check and age assessment. In the case of very young kittens (birth - 3 weeks old) unless a surrogate mother can be found, it may be potentially kinder to have the vet put the kitten to sleep. This is a consideration you should discuss with the vet, based on the kitten's age, health status and your capacity to care for a very young kitten. To find a surrogate mother cat you will need to call around vet clinics and shelters.

A kitten raised in total isolation from other cats is at great risk of developing psychological abnormalities, including nervousness, aggression and a reduced ability to cope with strange surroundings, people or other animals.

The key development period of an orphan kitten for friendly feline contact is between 4-12 weeks old. It's advised they should have supervised contact with older kittens or cats who are fully vaccinated during this time. Also, you can call vet clinics and shelters to find other orphan kittens they could be raised with. Additionally, kittens between 3-8 weeks old need to be exposed to a variety of things to grow up to be well-adjusted friendly cats (eg lots of gentle handling by different people – old/young/male/female; exposure to household sounds – radio/tv/vacuum cleaner; toys that encourage pouncing and catching skills).

To raise an orphan kitten, total dedication and commitment is required by you at all times. You need to provide a hygienic, warm environment, a proper feeding regimen according to their age, attention to urination and defecation and attention to general health – including psychological and behavioural health. Importantly, your lifestyle must be flexible (including work and personal commitments) so the intervals between feeding times is not exceeded (eg 2 week old kittens need 2-3 hourly feeds) and all their other special needs are met.

Remember, in some cases it is not in their best interest to be hand-reared, especially when they are very young (birth – 3 weeks old) and certainly if you don't have the time and resources.

How old is the kitten?

The age of the kitten will help you know what their special needs are for each stage of their growth period – there's a big difference between the needs of a 2-week old kitten compared to a 6-week old kitten.

A kitten's weight roughly reflects their age: 100gms – 1 week old, 200gms – 2 weeks old, 300gms – 3 weeks old and so on until they are 12-14 weeks old. Although, a kitten could be much older than his/her weight reflects for several reasons; the kitten has been orphaned for a long time and lost considerable weight from not being fed; the mother cat may have had an inadequate milk supply; or the kitten may be suffering a medical condition.

The average birth weight of a kitten is 100gms, although it is normal for a kitten to drop below their birth weight in the first 24-48 hours. However, they should steadily gain weight from then on and have doubled their birth weight in the first two weeks. If a kitten loses weight from one day to the next they need immediate veterinary attention. Failing to seek medical help may result in the kitten becoming very ill and/or passing away.

Importantly, kittens between birth and 4 weeks should be weighed daily (preferably at the same time each day) on kitchen scales and then weighed at least 3 times per

week after that to ensure they are gaining weight. You will need kitchen scales for this. You cannot use bathroom scales as these are designed for humans and cannot accurately measure the light weight of a kitten. Also, don't rely on your memory – record the weights in a diary/notebook, or on a calendar.

Kitten development stages

Week 1 - Kittens are born deaf and blind. Their umbilical cord will dry up and fall off 3 days after birth. Their eyes will be closed and their ears folded over. They cannot walk and will sleep 90 per cent of the time (nursing the other 10 per cent). They cannot urinate or defecate on their own.

Week 2 - Eyes may begin to open but vision is blurry. Their pupils are not able to dilate at this age so please keep the kitten shielded from bright lights and direct sunlight. In some cases eyes may be glued shut with sleepy gunk. If this happens, very gently wipe the kitten's eye with a cotton ball/pad that's been soaked in warm water. This may need repeating over a couple of days until the kitten's eye can open and shut with ease. A sense of smell and hearing begins to develop. They may begin to knead and crawl. Teeth start cutting the gums and continue erupting up until 5 weeks of age.

Week 3 - Their ears will start to stand up and their hearing improves. Their true eye colour may start to appear and their eyesight will improve. They'll start taking their first wobbly steps.

Week 4-5 - They become more mobile and less wobbly on their feet as their balance starts to improve. They should be able to urinate and defecate on their own, although there may be a few toileting accidents until they get used to using the litter tray. Weaning should begin and kitten wet food can be introduced. It is important they are safely contained in a pet crate or similar when not being supervised. Kittens from this age can be curious and adventurous so it is important they aren't left to wander around on their own.

Week 6-7 - The weaning process should be finished and they are eating kitten wet and dry food only. They will have developed their permanent eye colour. At 7 weeks baby teeth are fully grown and they are able to regulate their own body temperature the same as an adult cat.

Week 8-10 – During this period kittens are refining their social and mobility skills. Learning comes from observation of other kittens/cats and humans. They will be full of mischief and accident prone so it is important you make sure their environment is kitten proof and they are supervised when not safely contained in a pet crate.

Caring for orphan kittens between birth and 4-5 weeks old

Feeding

Once you have an idea of the kitten's age based on their weight you can work out what they should be eating, how much they should eat and how often they should be fed. Feeding the correct food for the right age is very important as introducing the kitten to solid foods too early can cause health problems. Importantly, never feed a kitten cow's milk or cat milk from the supermarket – both of these cause gastrointestinal problems (diarrhoea), impair growth and result in long-term health problems.

Kittens from birth to 3-4 weeks of age need bottle/syringe feeding with kitten-specific formula such as:

- **Biolac**
- **Divetalac**
- **Wombaroo Cat Milk Replacer**
- **Natural Solutions Goat Milk kitten formula**

These products can be purchased at most veterinary clinics, pet stores or online. They are powders that require diluting with water. Each product has dilution instructions and how much to feed the kitten daily (according to their weight). Carefully follow the instructions on the formula container for the dilution rate as they vary from brand to brand. Remember, never use kitten milk from a supermarket as this has a high sugar content and does not contain all the nutrients a young kitten will need to grow properly.

Feeding formula to a kitten is best done with a bottle and teat designed specifically for kittens or a syringe with a teat on the end can also be used. If the kitten does not suckle straight away use an eye dropper to drop formula on their tongue to encourage them. Importantly, avoid squirting formula in the mouth or down the throat as this can cause the formula to go into the lungs and cause aspiration pneumonia. If the kitten will not suckle on the teat or drink the formula **DO NOT** force them as this can cause serious health problems and the kitten could die. Importantly, seek veterinary advice/treatment if the kitten is not feeding properly.

Bottles and teats can be purchased from most veterinary clinics, pet stores or online. These items need to be kept very clean and hygienic – after single use wash them in warm soapy water, rinse then dry thoroughly.

It is important to keep everything you use for the kitten clean and hygienic – whether it is bedding, bowls, bottles or your own hands and clothes.

If the kitten is one who likes to wriggle a lot, wrap them in a small towel when feeding. Avoid feeding the kitten on their back as this can make them choke. The best way to feed a kitten is with the kitten's belly resting on a towel on your lap, place the teat of the bottle in the kitten's mouth and let the kitten suckle. The kitten may

move their front paws to the teat and this is perfectly normal as they would be using their paws to encourage milk flow from mum's teats with a kneading type movement (some kittens paw/grab at the bottle in a frenzy – don't worry this is normal for some kittens). The size of the hole in the teat is very important – you don't want formula to pour out too fast because that may cause the kitten to choke and a hole too small will frustrate the kitten and they won't get enough formula when they suckle. Again, if the kitten refuses to drink use an eye dropper to drop a few drops of formula on their tongue to encourage them.



Along with their weight you should record how much formula the kitten has drunk at mealtimes. If they are not drinking (fail to suckle) as much as they should according to the recommendations on the formula container you should seek veterinary advice.

The younger the kitten, the more frequent they should be fed. Kitten stomachs are very small so they need small, frequent meals. Excessive amounts fed infrequently can lead to diarrhoea which can be life-threatening.

It is important to try and mimic the natural feeding pattern a mother cat would provide (small amounts, often). If a kitten is left for more than 6 hours without food at a young age they can go into shock and die.

All formula should be given at room temperature or warmer (particularly if the weather is cold). Never serve cold formula or cold kitten wet food because this can cause digestion issues, stomach upset and is less appetising. Test the temperature of the formula on the inside of your wrist as you would with baby formula.

The following feeding chart is a general guide only. If a kitten is not feeding well and taking in the required amount of formula or wet food each mealtime then it may be

necessary to feed them more frequently. Remember, it is better to increase the amount of times per day you feed the kitten rather than increase the amount of formula/food per mealtime.

Importantly, if a kitten's appetite is poor from one mealtime to the next you need to seek veterinary advice/treatment.

Age	Food type	Amount	How often
Birth-2 weeks old	Kitten formula	According to instructions on formula container	Every 2-2 ½ hours around the clock (10-12 times per day)
2-3 weeks old	Kitten formula	According to instructions on formula container	Every 3 hours around the clock (8 times per day)
3-4 weeks old	Kitten formula	According to instructions on formula container	Every 4 hours around the clock (6 times per day)
4-5 weeks old	Commence weaning. Introduce kitten wet food and supplement with formula until kitten is eating wet food consistently	Start with 1 heaped teaspoon of wet food and increase to 2 teaspoons per mealtime when kitten has taken to eating wet food consistently	4 times per day spread evenly between 6am and 10pm

Mother cats typically groom their kittens while they're nursing. To mimic this action use a soft toothbrush and gently stroke the kitten along their body while they suckle. The brush acts similar to a mother cat's tongue and can help the kitten to feed better.

Toileting

Kittens from birth to 3-4 weeks old will need to be toileted by you. Their mother would normally do this by licking their abdomen and then around their genital area to stimulate them to toilet until their bladder and bowel muscles have strengthened. To help them toilet, use a warm damp soft cloth, cotton ball, tissue or hanky and gently wipe from the belly to the genital and anal area in a circular motion. This will help the milk move through the gut and pass. Their stools will be pasty and usually the colour of formula and urine should be a light yellow colour. Do this immediately after each mealtime until you notice either urine or faeces. Some kittens respond better to being stimulated to toilet just before being fed. Try both ways until you know what the kitten prefers.

Your kitten may not defecate after each meal but should urinate after or before each meal. You should only need to stimulate the kitten for 30 seconds before they toilet.

Do not keep rubbing as this could irritate their sensitive skin. The kitten may toilet between feeds on their bedding or on themselves, so always check bedding for wet patches and have spare clean towels and blankets handy.

Importantly, record the kitten's elimination type and frequency and seek veterinary attention if the kitten does not urinate regularly throughout a day or defecate at least once per day. Not passing waste normally can be life-threatening.

Again, don't rely on your memory. You will suffer loss of sleep throughout this process so it is necessary you record important details about the kitten's toileting habits, their daily weight and formula/food intake and frequency.

During the weaning process you will notice their stools may change colour due to the different food they are eating and occasionally their stools might become softer than usual as they eat more wet food.

If the kitten gets sloppy/watery type poo (diarrhoea) you should seek veterinary treatment as soon as possible. Many things can cause diarrhoea, sometimes it is the change in diet but it may indicate a gastrointestinal illness.

Weaning (from 4 weeks old)

The transition from formula to wet food (weaning) should be done slowly - if weaning is done too suddenly or too early you will stress the kitten. For some kittens the weaning process may take a couple of weeks.

To begin, place a small amount of food (1 heaped teaspoon) on a small flat saucer or shallow bowl and let the kitten smell it. You can place a tiny amount on their tongue with your finger to let them taste it. NEVER force the kitten to eat or rub their face in the bowl.

Only feed kitten-specific wet food that is complete and balanced. Avoid fish/seafood varieties as kittens' stomachs are too sensitive to digest the oils in fish and it can give your kitten diarrhoea – chicken or meat varieties are less likely to cause upset stomachs. If the kitten doesn't seem interested in the food you can mix a few drops of warm formula with the food to make it smell more appetising.

Alternatively, begin by offering the kitten formula on a spoon. Once they are lapping off the spoon, try putting some formula in a saucer. After they master lapping formula from a saucer gradually add kitten wet food. Once you notice the kitten is starting to eat wet food properly give them less formula, but until they are eating most of the wet food each mealtime continue supplementing their diet with formula.

Remember, always serve formula or wet food at room temperature or warmer. Never feed kittens dog food or human food (including baby food) – all of these can cause gastrointestinal problems (diarrhoea/vomiting) and some foods are toxic to cats and kittens. Also, adult cat food lacks important nutrients kittens need.

A young kitten may step on their food so it is important to discard leftover food and serve fresh food each mealtime.

Importantly, never attempt to feed a kitten who is cold/chilled. A kitten who feels cold and unresponsive should be warmed immediately but slowly. Place them on a warm heat pad/hot water bottle wrapped in two or three layers of towels. Feeding kittens when they are cold can overwhelm their internal organs and cause serious health problems. If the kitten remains unresponsive seek veterinary attention immediately.

Hydration and water intake

The age when a kitten begins to lap water varies. Kittens as young as 4 weeks old can begin to lap water but sometimes it is not until they are 5-6 weeks old. Kitten wet food has a high water content (approximately 70 per cent) so if they don't lap water immediately after being weaned off formula that is not unusual. However, you should continue supplementing wet food meals either with formula or add water to their wet food until they start lapping water themselves. When they are 4 weeks old introduce them to a shallow tip-proof bowl of water. To attract their attention - tap the water lightly with your finger and place your wet finger on their lips/mouth. By doing this regularly they will eventually begin to take interest in the water and begin to lap.

To check a kitten's hydration level, check their gums – they should feel moist, not dry, sticky or tacky. Another method is testing their skin's elasticity – with two fingers gently pinch an area of skin along their spine or on their chest. In well hydrated kittens the pinched skin should bounce back into place when it is released. When the skin is slow to return to its place this is a sign of dehydration. Pale gums, sunken eyes, dark yellow/brown coloured urine, very hard stools and paws that appear cool to touch could also indicate the kitten is dehydrated.

Kittens have a higher percentage of body water compared to adult cats and they experience greater water losses through their immature kidneys, skin, and lungs. Kittens can become dehydrated due to inadequate consumption of formula/water or excessive fluid losses (diarrhoea/vomiting).

Importantly, if you are concerned about the kitten's hydration seek veterinary advice/treatment as soon as possible. Dehydration can be life-threatening.

Litter tray training

Litter tray training should commence when the kitten is about 3-4 weeks old. Use a low-sided plastic tray so the little kitten can easily get in and out. Use litter that is safe for kittens. Some kittens have a tendency to 'eat' litter so use a safe product like recycled paper (Breeders Choice is recommended).

To begin training, stimulate the kitten's genital area as you have been doing and as soon as they begin to urinate or defecate place them in the tray gently to complete the process. Do this until the kitten gets used to finishing their toileting in the tray. The next step is to place the kitten in the tray before or after mealtimes without stimulating them first. If they don't toilet by themselves you will need to go back to stimulating them first. Also, placing a nugget of kitten poo in the tray and mimicking a scratching behaviour in the litter with your fingertips to get the kitten's attention can encourage a kitten to use the tray. At this age kittens are mobile so they need to have a litter tray nearby so they can toilet in the tray whenever they need to.

It is acceptable and normal for young kittens to have a few toileting accidents (toileting outside their tray) while they get used to using the litter tray, so during this time you need to be patient, but if a kitten persistently toilets outside of the tray then you need to intervene.

Some reasons a kitten won't use the litter tray include:

- The litter is dirty – change the litter regularly. Cats and kittens prefer to toilet in fresh clean litter.
- The tray is inaccessible or in spot that makes them uncomfortable – always have a litter tray nearby to the kitten. Cats and kittens of all ages prefer to toilet in a quiet spot. Corners of rooms are preferable – not busy hallways or in the middle of a room where they may feel spooked and less inclined to go.
- Medical issues – toileting in areas other than in the tray may indicate a medical issue. Kittens can get urinary tract infections and other illnesses which cause inappropriate toileting habits.
- Sometimes it is the type of litter. Both kittens and adult cats have strong preferences for different types of litter.

Please remember never punish a kitten for any 'accidents' they might have and seek veterinary advice/treatment if inappropriate toileting persists.

Inappropriate toileting has the added problem of 'how best to clean the areas in which the kitten has toileted'. DO NOT USE regular household cleaner (specifically the big problem is ammonia-based cleaners as these smell similar to some components of cat urine). Most household cleaners 'trap' the smell of urine/faeces to the spot whether it's a hard floor surface, carpet or bedding etc. Urine and faeces have proteins in them. The only way to break down these proteins is by using a commercial cleaner specifically for cats (eg Urine Off, Urine Free) or alternatively you can make up a cleaning solution yourself.

Biozet laundry powder has enzymes that break down the proteins in urine, blood and faeces. Take one small scoop of Biozet and add 1 litre of water (about 1/8 of a bucket) and mix well. Remove as much urine or faeces with paper towel first then clean the area with the Biozet solution. Biozet and other enzyme-based laundry powders are available from most supermarkets.

It also helps to cover or block an area where the kitten has inappropriately toileted to help ensure he/she doesn't return to the same spot again. Kittens have a keen sense of smell and if the spot has not been cleaned properly and with the proper cleaning products then they will most likely toilet in the same spot again.

Keeping warm and dry

Importantly, young kittens need to be kept in a stable, warm and dry environment at all times. Kittens under 6-7 weeks old are very susceptible to hypothermia because they cannot regulate their own body temperature. A well-covered hot water bottle can be used in the nest/bedding area but they don't retain their heat for long periods of time. The best form of heating for young kittens is a heat pad - specifically designed for small animals/mammals. SnuggleSafe microwave heat pads are ideal and can be bought online, some veterinary clinics or from pet stores and they come with their own cover or even a stuffed toy you can put them in. Whether using a hot water bottle or heat pad ensure they are well covered so there's no possibility the kitten can be scalded.

It is extremely important to keep the kitten warm at all times - not hot, cool or cold. Fluctuating or excessive temperatures can be life-threatening to a young kitten. Kittens should be relaxed while asleep and warm to touch.

Keep kittens indoors unless they need to be taken to the vet and keep them away from draughts, excessive heat sources (heaters/fires) or excessive cold sources (fans/air-conditioners). If possible, keep them in a room that has a stable ambient temperature.



The most common problems encountered when hand-rearing young kittens are chilling, dehydration and starvation.

Kitten bed/nest

Kittens under 3 weeks old are best housed in a cat carrier/cage lined with newspaper and soft blankets or a cosy igloo or sack type bed and a soft toy to snuggle up with. They don't need a litter tray yet so the bed/nest does not need to be large, although a kitten should have room to move away from the heat pad if they find it too warm.

Newspaper is excellent to use as a basket liner as it retains warmth. You will need spare clean blankets/towels on hand in case the bed/nest becomes wet or dirty.

When they are older than 3 weeks they need access to a litter tray so their nest/bed area needs to be larger. A pet/dog crate is ideal – something that keeps them safely contained but can comfortably fit a small litter tray, a snugly sleeping area and food/water bowls for when they begin eating kitten wet food and lapping water (this normally occurs from 4 weeks of age onwards).

Importantly, pet crates and cat carriers/cages keep your kitten safely contained when you're not around to supervise them.

To help reduce draughts and keep the kitten warm cover the pet crate or cat carrier with a towel or sheet.



Sanitation

Kittens can become dirty from spilt formula, stepping on food or rolling in a blanket they've toileted on. To keep the kitten clean use non-perfumed hypoallergenic baby wipes or just warm water and a soft cloth. Do not use regular wipes or wipes that are heavily perfumed – they often contain harsh ingredients that may irritate the kitten's delicate skin. Importantly, dry the kitten thoroughly after wiping clean – never leave a kitten wet or damp. When cleaning dirty bottoms – do not use the same cloth/wipe to clean dirty faces. This prevents spreading germs from the bottom area to the mouth/face.

Alternatively, for very dirty kittens bathe them in warm water with a small amount of mild shampoo (recommended brands are Natural Animal Solutions Shampoo Sensitive, Dermcare Natural Shampoo or Dermcare Aloveen Oatmeal Shampoo – these are safe to use on young kittens). Importantly, make sure the room is warm before bathing the kitten, the water is warm and the kitten is dried immediately and kept warm afterwards. Never use a hair dryer.

Keep kitten items (eg bowls, bottles, bedding, litter trays) separate from other pet items. Wash them separately (including bedding) and store them separately (a plastic tub with a lid is good for this purpose). Young unvaccinated kittens are very

susceptible to disease and illness so it is important you maintain a proper sanitation regimen that includes the personal hygiene of the people handling/nursing the kittens. This includes washing hands thoroughly before and after handling/nursing a kitten and wearing clothes that have not been in contact with other pets (a robe/gown or smock set aside is good for this purpose).

Additionally, a kitten's sense of smell is very acute (the same as an adult cat) therefore it is advisable you don't use strong smelling cleaning or disinfectant products to clean kitten items and avoid spraying/using strong smelling household cleaners/products near where kittens sleep, eat or play (some of these might be toxic; always check labels).

To ensure bedding (blankets/towels) is kept hygienic, wash these items in a 'hot wash' cycle. Hot water helps to kill parasites and diseases.

When to seek veterinary treatment

Kittens can become ill very quickly and even die within a short space of time, therefore, it is really important you seek veterinary advice or treatment sooner rather than later.

Common conditions for which you must seek veterinary treatment as soon as possible:

- Diarrhoea (cowpat or liquid/runny faeces)
- Mucous in faeces
- Blood in urine or faeces
- Dark coloured urine
- Vomiting
- Lethargic, unresponsive
- Crying incessantly, persistently unsettled
- Not eating, eating very little
- Losing weight
- Bloated stomach
- Straining to urinate or not urinating
- Straining to defecate or not defecating
- Cat-flu symptoms: sneezing, coughing, red ulcerated eyes, yellow/green discharge from eyes or nose, congestion, open mouth breathing, wheezing, fever, ulcers on lips/nose or tongue, lameness, swelling of paws/limbs
- Headshaking, eyes shaking
- Fur loss, red/flaky spots on skin

Important note: The above list is not exhaustive. It is important to seek veterinary treatment at any time you think something is wrong with the kitten.

Parasite prevention

Kittens need to be wormed at 4, 6, 8, 10, 12 weeks of age then every 3 months for the rest of their life with an all-wormer. Worming products for young kittens come in paste, or tablet form. The best quality treatments are available from veterinary clinics (eg Milbemax).

Importantly, the correct dose should be given based on the kitten's weight. Too high a dose can be harmful and too low a dose will be ineffective. If the kitten is in poor health, consult a vet before administering worm treatment. Worms in a kitten's gut can cause internal bleeding and if left untreated the kitten could die. Worms can be seen in faeces - alive if heavily burdened or dead once the kitten has been given a worming product.

Fleas are the most common external parasite found on kittens. Unfortunately, many cat/kitten flea treatments (topical liquids and tablets) are not suitable for kittens under 6-8 weeks of age. To treat young kittens (<6 weeks old) who have fleas bathe them according to the instructions for bathing under 'Sanitation'. The majority of fleas should wash off and any remaining fleas can be easily picked off. Importantly, never use flea shampoos on young kittens as they can be toxic. Washing the kitten will not kill the fleas so you will need to drown any fleas that fall off or ones you remove. Flea combs can be useful to remove fleas from your kitten as well. If the kitten remains flea burdened after bathing call your vet for advice. A kitten who is left untreated for fleas can become anaemic and die – because the fleas literally suck the blood out of the kitten.

Important note: Not all supermarket and pet store flea prevention products marketed for kittens and cats are safe to use. Many of these products contain active ingredients (natural and synthetic) that can be harmful if ingested from licking/grooming or inhaling. This includes flea spot-on treatments, shampoos, rinses and/or sprays to use in a cat's environment (eg on bedding, carpet). The most effective and safest flea prevention products to use are those recommended by a vet. The safest way to treat fleas in the environment when caring for kittens or cats is thorough and regular vacuuming and washing all kitten and pet bedding in hot water.

Caution: NEVER use dog products on kittens or cats (of any age). Many dog flea and tick products contain active ingredients highly toxic to cats and in many cases life-threatening. Additionally, products containing essential oils should be avoided – many of these can be toxic whether applied directly to the skin or inhaled.

Socialising

It is critical to handle young kittens gently and often. This will help them to develop into friendly confident cats. Handling can include nursing, patting or using toys to stimulate play by a variety of people if possible. As mentioned earlier, young kittens should ideally have contact with other kittens or kitten-friendly adult cats.

Importantly, any contact with an older kitten, adult cat, other pets or children should

be under supervision and other cats/pets should be up-to-date with their vaccinations.

For more information about socialising and training your kitten refer to our factsheet teaching your cat good manners under cat care and health – cat care factsheets on our website.

Grooming

When kittens are young their mother would be constantly grooming them to keep them clean and also help with socialisation. It is important you replicate this with an orphan kitten. To do this gently rub them with a soft flannel (not too rough) in the direction of the fur and against it to prevent the kitten developing hypersensitivity. As they get older use a rubber tipped brush or grooming mitt to brush them. This will help them get used to being groomed and encourage them to groom themselves.

Kitten-proofing your home

Once kittens become more mobile and adventurous it is important to kitten proof the areas in your home where the kitten might go. They are very good at squeezing into small spaces and getting stuck (under furniture/fridges/stoves, behind furniture) and climbing on things that may fall/tip over and chewing items like internet cables or electrical cabling. Open windows or doors need to have secure flyscreens and those without should be kept shut. Accidents (sometimes fatal) can happen so it's important to be mindful of what presents a danger to an inquisitive little kitten. Young kittens should ideally be safely contained in a pet crate when they cannot be supervised.

Caring for kittens between 5-10 weeks old

Feeding

From 5-6 weeks of age your kitten should be eating mostly wet food and very little formula. Continue feeding them small meals 4 times per day. Remember, always ensure you are feeding kitten-specific food that is complete and balanced (the cat food label should say this) as this will help your kitten get all the nutrients they need to be healthy. Again, it is recommended you avoid fish/seafood varieties until they are an adult (just because there are fish varieties of food marketed for kittens does not mean it is good for them).

When they are fully weaned and eating wet food exclusively you can introduce kitten dry food. It is a good idea to mix the dry food with a tiny bit of warm water to begin with as the water will moisten the biscuits and make them a little easier to chew.

Some kittens (and cats) prefer their wet and dry food mixed together, others don't. If this is the case give your kitten a double bowl and put the dry food in one side and the wet in the other. Dry food will help your kitten with teething and keeping their gums healthy.

Kittens need nutritional requirements of a good quality kitten food that is complete and balanced until they are at least 10 months old. After this they should transition to adult cat food.

Age	Food type	Amount	How often
5-6 weeks old	Kitten wet and dry food. Kittens should be fully weaned by 6 weeks of age	1 heaped teaspoon of wet food and 1 teaspoon of dry food	4 times per day
6-8 weeks old	Kitten wet and dry food	1 heaped teaspoon of wet food and 1 heaped tablespoon of dry food	3 times per day
8-10 weeks old	Kitten wet and dry food	1 heaped tablespoon of wet food and 1 heaped tablespoon of dry food	3-2 times per day

Note: Some kittens prefer wet food while others prefer dry food (this is the same for adult cats). If this is the case feed the kitten what they prefer. Importantly, avoid changing the variety or brands of food frequently. This can cause stomach upsets and diarrhoea because kitten stomachs are sensitive to changes in diet.

Additionally, clean, fresh water should always be provided in a heavy bowl so your kitten doesn't knock it over (which they will when they play with it). Remember to avoid pet milks from supermarkets because they are high in sugar and can cause health issues.

Parasite prevention

Continue worming your kitten every 2 weeks up until 12 weeks of age to ensure he/she remains free of internal parasites. Remember to weigh your kitten before administering treatment.

Veterinary recommended topical flea treatments can be safely applied from 6-8 weeks of age (depending on the product). This needs to be done every 4 weeks (28 days). Always read the label and directions for use with any commercial product you use on your kitten and remember to NEVER use a dog product on a kitten or cat as they commonly contain insecticides that are highly toxic to cats.

For more information about cat and dog flea treatments refer to our factsheet on Permethrin poisoning under cat care and health – cat care factsheets on our website or contact your vet.

Vaccinations

It is important to discuss with your vet an appropriate vaccination schedule for your kitten. Vaccinations normally commence from 6-8 weeks of age and are essential to

protect your kitten from common life-threatening feline diseases. Your kitten should not be allowed outdoors or have contact with other animals who are not vaccinated.

For more information about vaccinations refer to our factsheet on vaccinations under cat care and health – cat care factsheets on our website or contact your local vet.

Toileting

By 6 weeks of age your kitten should be fully litter trained and any inappropriate toileting behaviours have been addressed. Remember toileting accidents can be caused by a medical condition so it is important to first seek veterinary advice/treatment if your kitten persistently toilets outside of their tray. If a medical issue is not the cause then you must investigate other possible reasons. It is not helpful to overlook or excuse inappropriate toileting habits. This pattern of behaviour if left unaddressed can continue through until adulthood when the problem becomes a major issue.

For more information about inappropriate toileting or litter training refer to our factsheets under cat care and health – cat care factsheets on our website or contact your vet.

Keeping warm and dry

As previously mentioned, kittens cannot regulate their own body temperature until they are about 7 weeks old therefore it is important they are kept indoors, warm and dry. Continue providing a heat pad/hot water bottle particularly if the weather is cool/cold.

Environmental enrichment

A cat or kitten's level of comfort with their environment is intrinsically linked to their physical health, emotional wellbeing and behaviour. Cats and kittens who experience stress are highly susceptible to becoming ill and/or developing problem behaviours. Cats and kittens are very good at hiding signs of stress, so it is important owners and carers don't dismiss or overlook the importance of providing environmental enrichment suitable for the age of the kitten or cat.

Some examples of feline environmental enrichment are:

- Good quality, age-appropriate food
- Regular mealtimes (same time each day)
- Clean litter and a litter tray that is appropriate for the size of the kitten or cat
- Placement of litter trays in private but accessible areas of the home
- Scratching posts/boards/mats
- Comfortable, warm sleeping options – cat beds/igloos/owner's bed
- Vertical space options – cats love elevated sitting/sleeping spots and viewing their world from up high

- Safe hiding spots – areas where a kitten or cat can retreat to if they want to get away from another cat/pet or person.
- Toys – particularly toys that encourage pouncing and catching skills
- Treats – cat grass, catnip or good quality commercial treats
- Food puzzles
- Water fountains – many cats love running water.

Desexing

Once your kitten reaches 8-10 weeks of age and is healthy they can be safely desexed. Kittens can reach sexual maturity as early as 3-4 months of age (12-16 weeks). Desexing kittens before they have a chance to mate or become pregnant helps prevent the development of anti-social behaviour, unplanned pregnancies and reduces the risks of a number of diseases (including some cancers).

For more important information on desexing refer to our factsheet under cat care and health – cat care factsheets on our website. There is also a video about early-age desexing available via our website and YouTube channel.

If you need assistance with discount desexing please call us on 9519 7201.

Microchipping and Registration

If you care about your kitten they should be microchipped and registered so they can be reunited with you if they ever become lost. Also, by law your kitten must be microchipped and registered by 4 months of age (16 weeks). The cost of lifetime registration is significantly less expensive if the kitten is desexed.

For more important information on microchipping and registration refer to our factsheet under cat care and health – cat care factsheets on our website.