

FACTSHEET

Orphan kittens - considerations

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 their 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 living in a soiled nest area indicates they most likely have been abandoned.

In the case where a kitten is in danger of being injured (e.g., 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 (e.g., 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 (e.g. 2 week old kittens need 2-3 hourly feeds) and all their other special needs are met.

Keep in mind sometimes, even though you may try your best, these kittens do not always survive so you need to be mentally prepared for this as well.

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 their 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 90-100gms, 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.

Please see our factsheet on [Caring for orphan kittens between birth and 4-5 weeks old](#), for more detailed information should you decide you are prepared to try and hand rear any kitten you have found after consultation with your vet.

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