



Tree House Humane Society

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Basic Neonatal Kitten Care

Tree House Humane Society is proud to be able to help many neonatal kittens every year. Unfortunately, isolation space and foster homes are limited, so we hope that this information will help if you find kittens while trapping. This fact sheet explains the basics of caring for motherless, neonatal kittens.

If You Find Kittens

First, determine whether they have a mother. Mother cats may be out for several hours at a time, so try to wait somewhere discreetly to see if she comes back. **DO NOT** assume kittens are motherless as soon as you find them. It is very important that they have their mother and you should do everything possible to keep them together.

If the kittens have a mother, you have several options:

- Take the mother and kittens into your home and confine them in a large cage or a small room such as a bathroom. This prevents the mother cat from moving the kittens and she will take care of raising them until they are old enough to be socialized and placed in homes. Once the kittens have been fully weaned, the mother can then be spayed and returned to her colony.
- Allow the mother cat to care for her kittens where you found them. Unfortunately, she may move them at any time, so try to make the location as attractive and comfortable as possible. Give her a comfortable shelter and provide food and water every day. If you catch the kittens when they are weaned they can be socialized and placed in homes.
- Take the kittens from the mother, have her spayed and returned to the original trapping site, and raise the kittens yourself. This ensures that the mother will not move the kittens and they will be socialized to humans. However, in most cases it is best to keep kittens with their mother for at least the first few weeks of life.

If the kittens are abandoned by the mother cat:

- Bring them into your home to establish their age, as well as medical and feeding needs. At this point, you must act quickly because neonatal kittens are fragile. Delay can be fatal. Kittens should be alert and warm to the touch. **If the kittens are cold and listless, they must be warmed up immediately.** Chilling is the major cause of death of neonatal kittens, and can happen in just a few hours. Do not attempt to feed chilled kittens. Place the kittens in a box or pet carrier with a towel-covered heating pad set on low inside the box. Be sure the heating pad covers only half of the bottom of the box as the kittens must be able to move off the heating pad if it becomes too warm.

Determining Age

Under one week: Eyes shut, ears flat to head, skin looks pinkish. Part of umbilical cord may still be attached.

1 week-10 days: Eyes beginning to open, ears still flat. A kitten this age is smaller than your hand.

3 weeks: Eyes are fully open, ears are erect, and teeth are visible. Kittens this age are just starting to walk and will be very wobbly.

4-5 weeks: Eyes have changed from blue to another color and/or kittens have begun to pounce and leap. Kittens this age will begin to eat regular cat food.

8 weeks: Kittens this age weigh approximately two pounds. If they have not been exposed to humans, they will likely be feral and unapproachable. If you trap them, they can still be socialized but it will take hard work and dedication.

Instructions for Kittens Four Weeks Old and Younger

Feeding

Kittens cannot be fed until they are warmed. Feeding chilled kittens is very dangerous. **Do not feed cow's milk** as it causes diarrhea, which can lead to severe dehydration. You will need KMR or other kitten milk replacement formula, along with special bottles for feeding. The pre-mixed liquid formula is easier to use than the powdered form. These supplies are available at veterinary offices, pet supply stores, and in some cases, your local humane society. Depending on their age, kittens will need to be fed every two to six hours around the clock.

To prepare the feeding bottle, squeeze the corner of the top of the nipple and cut a small hole in the nipple with a scissors. Make sure the hole is big enough for the milk to get through. Test the formula on your wrist - it should be slightly warm, not hot, and not cold. If a kitten cannot suck on the bottle, she may need to be fed with a veterinary feeding syringe (no needle).

After they eat, kittens need help to urinate and defecate. To do this, moisten a cotton ball with warm water and gently rub the kitten's anal area. Waste will be mostly liquid at this point.

Health

In addition to chilling, there are other conditions which must be treated without delay:

- Fleas can cause anemia in kittens and even death. If you notice fleas, you should flea comb the kitten as soon as possible. Do not use insecticides or any other flea products.
- Diarrhea and upper respiratory infection (similar to a human cold) are serious and should be immediately treated by a veterinarian.

Weaning

At about four weeks of age you can begin offering canned and dry kitten food. The kittens will begin using a litter box as well.