

How to Raise Orphaned Kittens

Mom's gone, and you're taking care of her orphaned kittens. Here's what to do.

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Posted: Fri Apr 27 00:00:00 PDT 2001

Ideally, choose a heating pad with at least three heat settings low, medium and high. If the kittens are less than a week old (eyes open at about 10 days), set the pad on high and cover it with a folded towel to prevent them from being exposed to too much direct heat. A kitten that urinates directly onto a hot pad could be scorched by the heated liquid. Turn the setting to medium or low for kittens older than 1 week. Be sure to check often to see if they're huddled on the pad or avoiding it that's your temperature gauge. The pad should have a removable, washable cover because you'll need to wash it often. Make sure that the kittens never have direct contact with a heating pad or hot water bottle; this could burn or even kill them if the pad or bottle is too hot.

Keep the kittens' box in a draft-free area and drape a towel over the top, but leave a slot open for fresh air. The darkness helps them get to sleep after eating and keeps their little bedroom warm while they snooze. If you have a stuffed animal made from natural cotton and free of any loose parts that could injure a kitten, put it in the box for the litter to cuddle with as a surrogate "mom."

Ideally, kittens should have had at least one meal from their mother's milk because the colostrum in her milk contains vital antibodies they need to fight diseases. Colostrum can only be absorbed during the first 24 hours, meaning that a kitten's first meal is vital in a very short time period. Once the mama cat is gone, however, you'll need to buy kitten formula. Several varieties are available on the market, either in liquid or powdered form. The liquids are basically the same as the powders, but you're paying for the convenience of having it premixed. Ask your veterinarian to recommend a formula.

In an emergency, you can use Similac or another human baby formula, or even warmed cow's milk, but both may give kittens diarrhea and should be given for the shortest amount of time possible. Unflavored Pedialyte, available in drug stores, helps fight dehydration in emergency cases, and a little corn syrup rubbed on the gums can elevate the blood sugar of very weak kittens to help them make it to the veterinarian.

You'll also need feeding bottles, which are typically available where kitten formulas are sold (well-stocked feed stores or your veterinarian). They have tiny rubber nipples with screw-on caps. You'll need to make holes in the nipples to let the formula out, so heat a large needle (holding it in pliers) and make a hole in the center of the nipple. Test it by filling the bottle with water and giving a little squeeze. The liquid should drip out very quickly, not squirt out or only drip. If in doubt, make the hole a little larger rather than too small, as it will frustrate the kitten if it can't get the volume of food it wants.