

Newborn kittens

Premature Delivery

Occasionally, a mother will deliver a litter several days premature. The kittens may be small, thin, and have little or no hair. It is possible for them to survive, but they require an enormous amount of care, since they are subject to chilling and are frequently very weak and unable to swallow. Some may be able to nurse but are so weak that they must be held next to the mother. Kittens that do not nurse can be fed with a small syringe, bottle, or stomach tube. The equipment and instructions for these procedures are available from a veterinarian. Premature kittens must be kept warm. The mother can provide sufficient radiant heat from her body if she will stay close to them. If she refuses, heat can be provided with a heat lamp, heating pad, or hot water bottle. Excessive heat can be just as harmful as chilling, so any form of artificial heat must be controlled. The temperature in the box should be maintained at 85 to 90 F (29.4 to 32.2 C), but the box should be large enough so the kittens can move away from the heat if it becomes uncomfortable.

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The mother will spend most of her time with the kittens during the next few days. The kittens need to be kept warm and to nurse frequently; they should be checked every few hours to make certain that they are warm and well fed. The mother should be checked to make certain that she is producing adequate milk.

If the mother does not stay in the box, the kittens' temperature must be monitored. If the kittens are cold, supplemental heating should be carefully provided.

If the mother feels the kittens are in danger or if there is too much light, she may become anxious. Placing a sheet or cloth over most of the top of the box to obscure much of the light may resolve the problem. An enclosed box is also a solution. Some cats, especially first-time mothers, are more anxious than others. Such cats may attempt to hide their young, even from her owner. Moving from place to place may continue and will endanger the kittens if they are placed in a cold or drafty location. Cats with this behavior should be caged in a secluded area. This type of mother has also been known to kill her kittens as a means of "protecting" them from danger.

Troubleshooting with the Newborn Kitten.

Kittens should eat or sleep 90% of the time during the first 2 weeks. If they are crying during or after eating, they are usually becoming ill or are not getting adequate milk. A newborn kitten is very susceptible to infections and can die within 24 hours. If excessive crying occurs, the mother and entire litter should be examined by a veterinarian promptly.

When the milk supply is inadequate, supplemental feeding one to three times per day is recommended and should be performed on any litter with 5+ kittens. There are several commercial formulae available that are made to supply the needs of kittens. They should be warmed to 95 to 100 F (35 to 37.8 C) before feeding. Its temperature can be tested on one's forearm; it should be about the same as one's skin. Supplemental feeding may be continued until the kittens are old enough to eat kitten food.

If the mother does not produce milk or her milk becomes infected, the kittens will also cry. If this occurs, the entire litter could die within 24 to 48 hours. Total replacement feeding, using the mentioned products, or adopting the kittens to another nursing mother is usually necessary. If replacement feeding is chosen, the amounts of milk listed on the product should be fed. Kittens less than 2 weeks of age should be fed every 3-4 hours. Kittens 2-4 weeks of age do well with feedings every 6-8 hours. Weaning, as described below, should begin at 3-4 weeks of age.

The First Few Weeks of Life

For the first month of life kittens require very little care from the owner because their mother will feed and care for them. They are born with their eyes closed, but they will open in 7 to 14 days. If swelling or bulging is noted under the eyelids, they should be opened gently. A cotton ball dampened with warm water may be used to assist opening the lids. If the swelling is due to infection, pus will exit the open eyelids and should be treated as prescribed by a veterinarian. If the eyes have not opened within 14 days of age, they should be opened by a veterinarian.

Kittens should be observed for their rate of growth. They should double their birth weight in about one week.

At two weeks of age, kittens should be alert and trying to stand. At three weeks, they generally try to climb out of their box. At four weeks, all of the kittens should be able to walk, run, and play.

Kittens should begin eating solid food about 3½ to 4½ weeks of age. Initially, one of the milk replacers or cow's milk diluted 50:50 with water should be placed in a flat saucer. The kittens' noses should be dipped into the milk 2 or 3 times per day until they begin to lap; this usually takes 1-3 days. Next, canned kitten food should be placed in the milk until it is soggy. As the kittens lap the milk, they will also ingest the food. The amount of milk should be decreased daily until they are eating the canned food with little or no moisture added; this should occur by 4 to 6 weeks of age.

Dietary Requirements of the Growing Kitten

Diet is extremely important for a growing kitten. There are many commercial foods specially formulated for kittens. We recommend that you buy FOOD FORMULATED FOR KITTENS. Adult formulations are not recommended since they do not provide the nutrition required for a kitten. Dog food should not be fed to cats since it is deficient in vital nutrients and the amount of protein required by kittens and adult cats.

Vaccinating the Kittens

Kittens are provided some immunity to feline diseases before and shortly after birth. Maternal antibodies last for only a few weeks; after this time, the kitten becomes susceptible to disease. The vaccination program should be started at about 6 to 8 weeks of age. Kittens should be vaccinated against feline enteritis (distemper or panleukopenia), respiratory viruses (feline herpesvirus and calicivirus), and rabies. If the kitten will be allowed to go outdoors or to be in contact with cats that go outdoors, leukemia virus vaccine should also be considered. Your cat's needs will be discussed at the time of the first visit for vaccinations.

Deworming the Kittens

Intestinal parasites ("worms") are common in kittens. Symptoms include general poor condition, chronic soft or bloody stools, loss of appetite, a pot-bellied appearance, loss of luster of the haircoat, and weight loss. Some parasites are transmitted from the mother to her offspring and others are carried by fleas. Some are transmitted through the stool of an infected cat. Very few of these parasites are visible in the stool, so their eggs must be detected by the veterinarian with a microscope.

A microscopic examination of the feces will reveal the eggs of most of these parasites. Generally, this test should be performed at the time of the first vaccinations. However, it may be performed as early as 3 weeks of age if a parasite problem is suspected. Treatment is based on the type of parasites found. Your veterinarian should be consulted for specific recommendations for your kittens.