

# Daily Care for your Foster Kittens

Because kittens are fragile, it is important for you to watch the behavior of your foster kittens closely and monitor their health daily. To keep track of their health, keep a journal of the kittens' weight, eating habits and overall health. You should weigh the kittens daily to ensure that they are growing, and record the weight in the journal. The following activities should be performed daily:

## Feeding

- Unless otherwise directed, feed each kitten  $\frac{1}{2}$  can of wet food per meal. Dry food should always be left out.
- Change food daily – do not just top up
- Provide new dishes for wet food at every meal
- Ensure that kittens have access to clean water at all times
- Monitor appetites closely

## Health Monitoring

- Look over your kitten(s) each day for any changes or potential medical problems
- Check body and fur
- Look closely in their eyes, ears and mouth
- Check any ID bands or collars to ensure they are not too tight
- Weigh kittens at the same time daily and keep track of weight in a journal
- Assess energy levels
- Monitor for any diarrhea or vomiting

## Socialization and Handling



- Handle kittens several times a day for at least 15 minutes per visit
- Under socialized kittens will need additional time spent visiting and handling
- Encourage affectionate behaviour by gently holding and petting
- Try to introduce your kittens to new people
- Brush daily to get them used to being groomed
- Gently handle paws in preparation for nail trimming
- Expose your kittens to being picked up and held

## Enrichment and Mental Stimulation

- Kittens should receive several daily play sessions of at least 15 minutes with interactive toys
- Remember to discourage play with hands by directing kittens to toys instead
- Never leave kittens alone with interactive toys
- Kittens should be provided with safe solo toys such as ping pong balls or wine corks, which can be left out at all times
- Change up the kittens' environment every few days. This can easily be accomplished by moving things around or introducing new items

## Cleaning

- Scoop the litter box at least twice daily
- Litter should be dumped and changed every two to three days and the box washed with mild unscented detergent (we recommend Dawn dishwashing liquid). This will be required more often if the kittens have diarrhea.
- Any spills should be wiped up. Avoid the use of any toxic cleaning supplies

- Make sure the kittens are clean and dry
- Replace bedding when wet or soiled

### **Cleaning Between Litters**

Once you've returned your group of kittens to London Animal Care Centre for adoption, you will need to sanitize your fostering room or area before you can take home a new batch of kittens. Being conscientious about sterilization will help ensure that your next foster group will not catch any illnesses from the previous group of kittens, even if they were not showing any signs of illness.

- Remove anything the kittens touched and clean it with a soap & water.
- If you have items that can be washed in the dishwasher, please do so since the heat will disinfect those items.
- Plastic or metal items that need to be sterilized, such as litter boxes or plastic toys, should be washed thoroughly.
- Wash all bedding with hot water
- If your kittens were sick, please let us know and we will provide you with Prevail, a spray that can be misted over any clean items for additional sanitization.
- Throw away any toys that cannot be sterilized.

## Bottle Feeding

Bottle-feeding neonatal kittens requires an around-the-clock commitment. Thank you so much for offering your time and attention to these fragile babies. Kittens that require bottle or supplemental feeding will require a few more supplies. Depending on the number of donations received, LACC may be able to supply these items from time to time. In addition to the standard supplies, here's what you'll need to care for bottle feeders:

- New bottle for each bottle-fed litter and formula for bottle-feeding: PetAg KMR is the required brand of formula for bottle-feeding kittens.
- Heat source: Kittens can't keep themselves warm, so you have to provide a heat source. The SnuggleSafe microwave heating pad is recommended.
- A secure sleeping area: A cat carrier with the door removed or a box laid on its side work well.

**Milk Preparation.** You can pre-mix enough formula to last for 24 hours of feeding, but it must be refrigerated at all times. Discard all unused and mixed formula after 24 hours. Only heat enough formula for each feeding, and throw away any uneaten warmed formula after each feeding. Do not re-use warmed formula because harmful bacteria can develop in it.



### Bottle-feeding Tip

It is easier to feed your kittens when they are gently wrapped in a towel or blanket, instead of just using your hands. The towel or blanket is softer and warmer than your hands, and being wrapped up makes the kittens feel safer as they eat. If the kitten allows it, the forelegs should be free to allow him to “knead” with his feet. This kneading activity is essential to the kitten’s muscle development and helps aid in digestion of the kitten’s food. Also, be careful to position the kitten so that his belly is toward the floor. To decrease the chance of formula being aspirated into the lungs, kittens

should not be fed on their backs.

**Latching on.** It may take a couple tries for a kitten to latch on to the bottle nipple. Just be patient; sometimes kittens need some encouragement to eat. Make sure that the nipple you are using on the bottle has an adequate flow of milk. When the nipple tip is punctured with a sterile needle, formula should drip out (one drop at a time, not a stream) when the bottle is inverted 180 degrees. Do not hesitate to call the animal care department if you need any help or assistance with feeding your kittens.

Please refer to the Bottle Feeding Chart (Appendix A) for feeding instructions based on age/weight.

Record all pertinent information on the Kitten Development Journal (Appendix B)

**Aspiration.** If liquid bubbles out through the kitten's nose or he starts coughing, he may have gotten formula in his lungs. Pat the kitten very gently on the back to elicit a cough or sneeze, or hold him in an inverted position, tail over head, for a moment to remove the formula from his lungs.



### **Peeing and Pooping**

Bottle-fed kittens need help with elimination, so you'll need to stimulate your kittens to pee and poop. After you feed them, gently wipe in a circular direction each kitten's back end with a baby wipe or warm wet cotton ball. Remember to do this every time you feed them. Document the color and consistency in the journal. Kittens should urinate after every meal and should poop at least once a day. The normal color of kitten poop is various shades of mustard and the consistency is similar as well. When a kitten is first introduced to formula, it is normal for him or her not

to poop for 48 hours.

**Signs of illness.** Watch for signs of illness, including frequent crying, restlessness, weakness, coldness (hypothermia), diarrhea, dehydration, shallow or labored breathing, paleness or blueness in color. Notify the shelter immediately if a kitten is limp or lethargic, is cold to the touch, or is having trouble breathing (either shallow or heavy breathing). Follow the emergency protocol if this occurs after hours.

**Keeping kittens warm.** When kittens are infants (less than two weeks old), they can be kept in small carriers or playpens that can easily be covered by a blanket to maintain heat and reduce draftiness. As they grow and become more mobile, they will need more space to roam and play. Also, don't forget that kittens cannot regulate their body temperatures, so please keep a SnuggleSafe disc or hot water bottle warm and with them at all times. Because kittens' skin is very sensitive and prone to thermal burns, any warming devices must be covered by a blanket and puppy pad that the kittens cannot burrow under.



# Bottle Feeding How To

Kittens will bottle-feed every two to four hours, depending on their age. Steps for bottle-feeding a kitten:

1. Warm the formula: Place the bottle in a bowl of hot water for a few minutes. Before feeding the kittens, always test the temperature of the formula by placing a few drops on your inner wrist to be sure it is not too hot. It should be slightly warmer than your body temperature.
2. Ensure that your foster kitten is warm before offering food. Do not attempt to feed a kitten who is chilled\* because it can have serious health consequences.
3. Wrap the kitten in a towel or blanket and position him so that his belly is toward the floor. Kittens should not be fed on their backs or in an upright position.
4. Turn the bottle upside down and allow a drop of formula to come out. Place the bottle nipple in the kitten's mouth and gently move it back and forth, holding the bottle at a 45-degree angle to keep air from getting into the kitten's stomach.

This movement should encourage the kitten to start eating. If at first you don't succeed, wait a few minutes and try again. Usually the kitten will latch on and begin to suckle. If the bottle appears to be collapsing, gently remove the nipple from the kitten's mouth and let more air return to the bottle.

5. Weigh each kitten before and after feeding and record the weights in your journal.

\* A kitten's ideal body temperature is 100 to 102 degrees. If a kitten feels cold to the touch, contact the animal care department immediately. A kitten who is cold and unresponsive should be warmed right away. Place the kitten on an approved heating pad safely wrapped in two or three layers of towels. Turn the kitten side to side every 5 minutes. To stimulate blood flow, you may gently massage the kitten with hand-rubbing.

## Weaning Kittens

Once your kittens are about four weeks old, it is time to start the weaning process. Your goal is to have the kittens eating on their own consistently by the time they're adopted. Beginning at four weeks, start offering warm gruel (two parts wet food, one part formula) at all times, along with dry kitten food and water. Every four to six hours, discard any uneaten gruel and provide a fresh batch.

You will still be supplementing the kittens with a bottle every eight hours to ensure that they are getting all the nutrients they need, but encourage them to eat gruel before you offer a bottle. To get a kitten interested in trying the gruel, you may have to offer the gruel with a spoon or use your finger to place a small amount on the kitten's tongue. Ideally, by the end of five weeks, your foster kittens will be happily eating dry and wet food on their own.

It is important to continue weighing your foster kittens every day, to ensure that they are always gaining weight. During the weaning stage, you should also begin introducing the kittens to the litter box because they should be able to eliminate on their own by about four weeks of age.

### **Making Formula (Powder)**

Mix two parts water with one part formula. Mix the powder and water until all clumps are gone. Remember, mixed formula only lasts for 24 hours.

### **Making Gruel**

Mix 1/2 can of wet kitten food (pate type) with 1/4 cup of pre-mixed formula per kitten. You can add a little water if the kittens seem to like a looser consistency.

## Caring for Independent Eaters

By six to seven weeks old, your kittens should be eating on their own. Dry food should be their primary source of food, but offer wet food frequently as well to encourage eating and maximize growth. Replace the water in their water dish twice a day and wipe out the dish if needed.

During this stage, your daily responsibilities include socializing the kittens and exposing them to new situations and environments. It's important to try and keep all experiences positive for the kittens, so give them lots of treats and toys as they learn about new sounds, smells, places and faces.

As always, watch the behavior of your kittens and monitor their health daily. Continue to keep a journal detailing each foster kitten's weight, appetite, energy level and overall health. Weigh the kittens once a day, preferably around the same time, to minimize the variables when tracking the kittens' growth. Look over each kitten every day for physical changes or potential medical problems.



Now that the kittens are using a litter box, be sure to scoop the box at least two times daily. Every 2-3 days, dump the litter, clean the box with a mild detergent (such as dishwashing liquid) and put in fresh litter. You'll want to monitor the kittens for diarrhea, and clean the litter box more frequently if diarrhea is apparent.

At this stage, play with the kittens several times a day with interactive toys. Play time provides stimulation, encourages socialization and releases excess energy. Try a variety of toys (balls, squeaky toys, feather toys, etc.) to see which ones your foster kittens like. Cat toys don't have to be fancy or expensive. Cats often enjoy playing with something as simple as a paper bag or a box with holes cut in the sides.

Don't leave your foster kittens alone with any toys that could be easily ingested or cause harm to them. Examples are string toys, yarn and Da Bird (feathers dangling from a string and wand). Toys such as ping-pong balls and toilet paper tubes are safe. Also, it may seem cute, but discourage your foster kittens from play-biting your hands and feet. This is something that adopters may not find desirable.

## Fostering Moms and Kittens

Fostering a mom cat (queen) with kittens is a very exciting and rewarding job! You will get to see intimately how a mom cat cares for her kittens, as well as the stages of development in their relationship.

### Environment

- Queens need to be in a calm environment
- Privacy, quiet and minimal activities are essential for queens to feel like they are keeping their kittens safe.
- Stress can cause a mother cat to become aggressive or may cause her to not care for her babies properly.
- Choose a private and quiet room of your home, away from the daily activities of your family, in which to house the mother cat and her kittens.
- It's important that they be kept away from other pets in the home. Other pets can be perceived as a threat by the mother cat and cause her to act aggressively to protect her young.
- We do not recommend fostering a queen and her kittens if you have a dog.
- If your home environment is loud/ active you may want to consider fostering kittens that do not need their mom.



## **Bringing Everyone Home**

- Set up your fostering room before you bring the mother cat and her kittens home.
- Put the litter box as far away from the mother cat's food and water bowls as possible
- Queens prefer to raise their babies in a nest - a box lined with towels that is large enough for the mother cat to lie on her side slightly away from her kittens with all of the kittens in the box with her is a perfect option. The box should have sides high enough to prevent the kittens from wandering away, but low enough so it's easy for the mother cat to come and go as she needs to.
- When you bring your foster kittens and their mom home, put them all in the fostering room and close the door, allowing the mom to explore on her own. Give her a couple of hours before you enter her room.
- Proceed slowly with any mom cat that you do not know. Let her come to you, pet her only as much as she is comfortable with.
- Mom cats need playtime too! Leave solo toys readily available and have interactive play sessions with her.

## **Mom's Care of her Kittens**

For the first three to four weeks, mom should do everything necessary for the kittens. During this time, the job of the foster parent is to keep mom happy and healthy while monitoring the kittens. Each momma cat that you foster will be slightly different, but you can generally expect the following:

- Kittens are born blind, but they can feel their mother's heat and seek her out to begin nursing within two hours of being born.
- Mother cats should be lying on their sides to ensure that their kittens can find the nipples for nursing. Here are three stages of nursing:
  - Stage 1 – mom initiates each nursing session by waking the kittens up through licking them and encircling them with her body
  - Stage 2 – at the second or third week, the kitten's eyes and ears begin the function and they start to explore inside and outside the nest. At this stage, the kittens will initiate feeding and the mom will lay on her side to accommodate them.

- Stage 3 – starting at about five weeks, the mom will begin the weaning stage by becoming more evasive and uncooperative. At this point you should encourage the kittens to eat canned and dry food.

### **Grooming**

- Kittens receive a lot of grooming and licking from their mothers during their first two to four weeks. Grooming stimulates elimination, and the urine and feces are ingested by the mom. This keeps both the babies and the nest clean.
- As the young start to leave the nest, they will eliminate close to, but outside of the nest. Other than cleaning a few more messes and providing a litter box with low sides, there is not much for you to do. The kittens will teach themselves how to use the litter box.



*Occasionally, mom cats develop mastitis when their kittens stop nursing and begin to eat on their own. Mastitis occurs when the mammary glands inflame and harden, creating a very painful infection for the mother cat and causing symptoms such as a fever and listlessness. If you think your mother cat may have mastitis, contact the animal care department. This is not an emergency condition.*

To ensure that the mother cat has enough to eat, give her access to both wet and dry food at all times. Food intake for a nursing mother can be two to four times the amount eaten by a cat who's not nursing.

When fostering a momma cat, it is very important to observe her behavior daily and watch her interactions with her kittens to spot any problems. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for kittens to pass away because of inadequate maternal care.

This can happen for many different reasons, most of which are beyond our control.

## **Healthy Mother-Kitten Relationships**

- A mother's direct interaction with her kittens includes the "brrp" or chirping calls she makes as she approaches them, as well as nuzzling and licking them to awaken them and to stimulate urination and defecation.
- Initially, the kitten's activities are restricted to crawling along the mother's body and nuzzling against her to locate a nipple, often in competition with litter mates. The kittens suckle, lie still by the mother, move around near her and call out to her.
- A call frequently given by the kittens is the cry associated with distress. It is given when a kitten awakens and is hungry, when a kitten's movement is restricted (e.g., the kitten is trapped under the mother) or he becomes isolated and cold. The mother should answer the call.
- Suckling is accompanied by kneading against the mother's abdomen. It is thought that these kneading movements stimulate the mother's milk flow, help to develop the kitten's muscles and aid in digestion. The kittens may initially spend about eight hours a day suckling, but this activity decreases as they grow older.

## **Problem Behaviors in Mom Cats**

### **Maternal Neglect**

Sometimes a mother cat stops providing care to one or all of her kittens. The neglect may be because of a birth defect or weakness in the kitten; she may just be trying to follow nature's course, focusing her attention on the stronger kittens. Neglect may also happen because she is inexperienced or she's in a stressful environment. If she will let you handle the kittens, you should weigh each kitten once a day to ensure that they are gaining weight. If you notice that she is spending all of her time away from the kittens, is not grooming or nursing them frequently, or doesn't respond to their cries, please call the animal care department right away.

### **Maternal Aggression Toward Other Animals**

Aggressive behavior directed at other animals is common and expected from mother cats because they have a maternal instinct to protect their young at all times. With that in mind, please do not try to introduce her to the

other animals in your home. As mentioned above, the mom cat and her kittens should have a quiet room of their own away from all other pets so that she and her babies can always feel safe. If she has seen another animal and becomes stressed or aggressive, it is very important to leave her alone and not try to comfort her. Give her 30 minutes or so to calm down and then check on her.

### **Maternal Aggression Toward People**

Sometimes mother cats will act aggressively toward people. These behaviors may include hissing, growling, swatting and biting. Again, the mother is merely trying to protect her young. We evaluate mom cats for these behaviors before sending them into foster homes, but sometimes the behaviors develop later. If you have a mother exhibiting these behaviors, do not try to “correct” the behavior with a spray bottle or any type of punishment. She is only acting out of instinct to protect her babies and you could cause her aggressive behavior to escalate.

Contact the animal care department at the first sign of any of the above behaviors so we can assess the situation and decide on the safest option for momma and her babies.

### **Separating Kittens and Moms**

If all of your foster animals, mom included, are healthy and friendly, we have no reason to separate mom from kittens before they are eight weeks old. But there are a few medical or behavioral reasons for separating them earlier than eight weeks:

- The mother cat is showing signs of maternal neglect and is no longer caring for her kittens.
- The mother cat is under socialized or displaying behavioural concerns and will not allow handling of either herself or her kittens. We do not want kittens picking up this antisocial behaviour from their mom.
- There is a medical concern that would warrant separation.

The kittens’ best chance at survival is to stay with their mom. Please do not separate your foster kittens from their mom for any reason without consulting the animal care department.