



FELINE FOSTER CARE GUIDE

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Preparing for your Kittens:

Your foster kittens should be separated from all other animals in your household and kept in a small area, such as a spare room or bathroom, where they have access to their food, water and litter box. And because kittens cannot regulate their body temperature, this area should also be in a warm, draft-free area. It may be a good idea to consider an area that is easy to clean up in terms of spills and litter box accidents, which will happen since the kittens are learning. Please don't put the kittens in a garage or place that has outdoor access; those locations are not safe.

Supplies you'll need

Dorchester Paws will provide you with any supplies that you may need. However, we greatly appreciate any help that you can provide in supplying items for your foster kittens. Here's what you'll need to care for your foster kittens:

- At least one bowl for dry food and one for water: If you have a large litter, you will need to provide more than one bowl each.
- Kitten food
- New bottle for each bottle-fed litter and formula (KMR) for bottle-feeding.
- Litter box with low sides: More than one may be needed for larger litters.
- Non-clumping litter
- Heat source: Heating pads work great
- A soft place to sleep: Old towels or blankets work well.
- A secure sleeping area: A cat carrier with the door removed or a box laid on its side work well.
- Toys: Use kitten-safe toys that are easy to sanitize and clean. Kittens can play with them when you're not home.
- Scratching post: Kittens need to learn to scratch on them rather than the furniture.

Feeding

Caring for bottle-fed kittens

Bottle-feeding neonatal kittens requires an around-the-clock commitment. Here's some general info about bottle-feeding.

QUICK FEEDING GUIDE			
AGE (Weeks)	FOOD TYPE	FREQUENCY	TOTAL AMOUNT
1 (Bottle feeding)	Milk replacement formula	Every 2-3 hours (8-12 times per day)	3-4ml per feeding
2 (Bottle feeding)	Milk replacement formula	Every 3 hours (8 times per day)	5-6 ml per feeding
3 (Bottle feeding)	Milk replacement formula	Every 4 hours (6 times per day)	13-17 ml per feeding
4 (Weaning stage)	Milk replacement formula, gruel, kitten chow and water	Kitten chow available at all times; bottle feed every 8 hours (3 times per day)	13-17 ml per feeding with the bottle; varies depending on gruel consumption
5-8 (Solid Food)	Dry kitten chow, wet kitten food and water	Available at all times	Offer fresh wet food 2-3 times daily

Milk preparation.

Mix two parts water with one part formula. Mix the powder and water until all clumps are gone. 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.

Gruel preparation. Mix 1/2 can of wet food with 1/4 can of formula per kitten. You can add a little water if the kittens seem to like a looser consistency. It's OK make gruel in bulk and refrigerate it, but you'll need to warm it before offering it to the kittens.

How to bottle-feed kittens

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 foster coordinator 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, ever so gently, massage the kitten with hand-rubbing.

- **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 foster department if you need any help or assistance with feeding your kittens.

- **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. Please notify the foster department if this happens so we can determine if antibiotics or a vet visit is needed.
- **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, wipe each kitten's back end with a warm wet cotton ball. Remember to do this every time you feed them. 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.
- **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 temperature so they need to be kept on a heating pad covered by a towel or blanket.

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. So, beginning at four weeks, start offering warm gruel 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, after each feeding, 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.

Preparing for Mom and Kittens

Mother cats need to be in a calm environment so that they can be stress-free and feel like they are keeping their kittens safe. Sometimes, stress can cause a mother cat to become aggressive or to not care for her babies properly. With that in mind, choose a private and quiet room of your home, away from the daily activities of your family, in which to situate the mother cat and her kittens.

It's also 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. If you have children and an active home, it may be best to foster when the kittens are four weeks or older. Sometimes mother cats will behave less defensively if their kittens are older.

Mom's care of her kittens

The momma cat should take care of her kittens by herself for at least three to four weeks before she starts the weaning process for her babies. Each momma cat that you foster will be slightly different in her level of attentiveness, but there are three basic stages of nursing (see below). If for any reason your momma cat is not performing one of the listed functions, please notify the foster coordinator right away to evaluate whether the mom has a medical concern that we need to address.

Three basic stages of nursing

- **One to two weeks old:** The mother cat initiates nursing by licking her kittens to wake them up and curling her body around them. After she wakes all of her babies, the kittens search for a short time period and then quickly latch on.
- **Two to three weeks old:** The kittens' eyes and ears begin to function and they start to explore beyond the nesting area. This is when the kittens start interacting and playing with their mother. At this age, the kittens start to initiate some of the nursing and momma should comply by lying in the nursing position.
- **Four to five weeks old:** The kittens begin weaning and, in turn, the mother cat no longer initiates any nursing. If the mother cat still allows the kittens to nurse, it will be initiated by the kittens and can be lateral or upright nursing.

The mother cat will groom and lick her babies frequently for the first two to four weeks. She will stimulate her kittens to pee and poop, and will generally consume the fecal matter and urine. As the babies become more mobile, they will start to leave the nest

and deposit urine and feces nearby, which is a good time to start introducing a couple of low-sided litter boxes.

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, 8 percent of kittens pass away because of inadequate maternal care. This can happen for many different reasons, some of which are beyond our control.

Problem behaviors in momma 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 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 foster coordinator 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 20 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 foster coordinator 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:

- If the mother cat is showing signs of maternal neglect and is no longer caring for her kittens, the foster coordinator may decide to separate her from her kittens.
- If the mother cat is semi-feral or very under socialized, we may decide to separate the kittens once they are eating on their own consistently and no longer need to nurse (around four to five weeks old). Separating them would prevent the kittens from learning feral behaviors from their mother and help them to become socialized, which increases their chances of finding forever homes.
- If there is a medical concern about the mom or babies, a veterinarian could make the decision to separate the kittens from the mother cat.

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, or attempt to supplement the mother's milk with formula, without consulting the foster coordinator.

Socializing and instilling good behaviors in kittens

Establishing good litter box habits

Start introducing your kittens to the litter box around the age of four to five weeks. Make sure the litter box you are using has low sides, to make it easy for the kittens to climb in and out. Keep kittens confined to a small area and have at least one litter box in each room that the kittens can access. You can encourage the kittens to use the litter box by gently returning them to their box every 15–20 minutes while they're playing.

You also want to make sure that you are scooping the litter box at least twice a day, more if you have a large litter or they have diarrhea. You will also need to dump the litter box entirely every two to three days and clean with dish soap. A clean litter box will promote good bathroom habits for the kittens going forward.

With kittens younger than eight weeks, though, use **only non-clumping litter**. The reason for this is that very young kittens tend to taste their litter and play in it. If you use clumping litter, the dust from the litter can solidify in their respiratory or digestive tracts.

Schedule for successful socialization

If your foster kittens are not socialized at all when you bring them home, you'll need to have a more focused socialization plan.

Days 1–7: Your foster kittens may be hissing, swatting, spitting and/or growling. Activities to engage in:

- “Burrito-wrapping” the kitten in a blanket or towel: Use gloves and a towel to handle the kitten if needed.
- Hand-feeding: Feed the kittens dabs of baby food or canned tuna.
- Picking up and returning: Repeatedly pick up each kitten and return him/her to their safe space.
- Playing: Try engaging the kittens in play with interactive toys.

Days 7–14: The kittens may hiss when you approach, but respond to touching and petting.

Activities to engage in:

- Handling: Continue handling and petting the kittens, but do not go too fast.
- More playing: Start standing and walking around while playing with the kittens, to get them used to normal human movement.
- More hand-feeding: Give the kittens treats while you handle them, to help them learn that you are not a threat.

After 14 days: Your kittens may still be shy, but should be more comfortable with you approaching them and should no longer display defensive aggression behaviors. If your kittens do not show improvement at all after two weeks of attempts at socialization, please contact the foster department for guidance.

Medical and emergency protocols

Clinic Appointments/Foster Rechecks

When you pick up your foster kittens, you will receive a Foster Agreement with the date of their foster recheck appointment. Vaccines and dewormers are given starting at four weeks old and every two weeks afterward until they are adopted. It is pertinent to make your scheduled appointments. To schedule/reschedule appointments, call or email the foster coordinator. **Please schedule an appointment with the Foster Coordinator before coming in for a clinic appointment. You may not be seen by clinic staff if you fail to schedule an appointment.**

If you are fostering a group of kittens on medications, please ensure that your kittens get all prescribed doses. Do not end medication early for any reason. If any of your foster kittens have not responded to medications after five days (or in the time instructed by a veterinarian), please contact the foster coordinator.

Veterinary care

Because we are ultimately responsible for your foster animals' well-being, our staff must authorize any and all treatment for foster animals at our approved veterinary partners. If your foster kittens need to go to the veterinarian, **please notify the foster coordinator** by phone. The foster coordinator has to give authorization for the animal to be taken for offsite treatment. Remember, **foster parents will be responsible for payment of any medical care if they take their foster animal to a veterinarian without authorization from the foster coordinator or foster and rescue manager.**

For **non-emergency** situations, please understand that our clinic books quickly and may not be available for same-day appointments. **We ask that you schedule basic non-emergency appointments at least 24 hours in advance. To schedule an appointment with the onsite veterinarian, please contact the Foster Coordinator at foster@dorchesterpaws.org.**

Signs of illness and what to do next

Kittens do a good job of masking when they don't feel well, so determining if a foster kitten is under the weather will require diligent observation of the kittens' daily activity and appetite levels. Be aware that kittens act differently at different ages. For example, a healthy two-week-old kitten will sleep often and get up only to nurse, whereas a healthy six-week-old kitten should have a lot of energy. If you have any questions about the health of your foster kittens, please contact the foster coordinator, who will be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

Eye discharge. It is normal for kittens to have some discharge from their eyes when they wake up. But if a kitten has yellow or green discharge, or swelling around the eyes (making it hard for him to open his eyes), or the third eyelid is showing, you need to contact the foster coordinator to schedule a vet appointment.

Sneezing and nasal discharge. Occasional sneezing is common in kittens. If the sneezing becomes more frequent, examine the discharge coming from the sneeze. If the discharge is clear, the infection is probably viral and medication may not be necessary. If the discharge becomes colored, contact the foster coordinator to schedule an appointment because the kittens may have a bacterial infection. If they start to breathe with an open mouth or wheeze, call the foster coordinator and follow the

emergency contact protocol. Also, once you notice nasal discharge, monitor the kittens' eating habits more closely to ensure that they are still eating.

Loss of appetite. Your foster kittens may be stressed after arriving in your home, and stress can cause lack of appetite. Unwillingness to eat in kittens can be very serious, so pay close attention to whether the kittens are eating. Kittens should eat on a four- to eight-hour schedule, depending on their age. If a kitten under four weeks old misses two meals or a kitten over four weeks of age goes more than 12 hours without eating, the foster coordinator should be called. Also, if a kitten less than eight weeks old does not urinate for over 12 hours, call the coordinator. With a kitten who is not eating, please do not change the kitten's diet without contacting the foster department. An abrupt change in diet can cause diarrhea, which will lead to dehydration.

Lethargy. The activity level of your kittens will vary with each kitten in your litter and with age. Sick kittens may have lower energy levels and just want to sit in your lap or on the floor and not move much or play. If you notice a drop in your foster kittens' energy level, please contact the foster coordinator to make an appointment with the clinic. If a kitten cannot be roused or seems weak and unable to stand, this is an emergency, so you'll need to start the emergency contact protocol. Note: Some undersocialized kittens will move less because they are frightened. If you have a fearful group of kittens, it can be more difficult to determine if their energy levels are low.

Dehydration. Dehydration is usually associated with diarrhea, vomiting and/or loss of appetite. To test for dehydration, gently pinch the kitten's skin around the scruff area. If the skin stays taut, the kitten is dehydrated. Please call the foster coordinator immediately and start the emergency contact protocol, as dehydration can be fatal in kittens.

Vomiting. If a foster kitten has thrown up two or more times in one day, please notify the foster coordinator. If there is bile or blood in the vomit, please call immediately.

Pain or strain while urinating. When kittens first go into a foster home, they may not urinate due to stress. If a kitten hasn't urinated in more than 24 hours, however, please contact the foster coordinator. Also, if you notice the kitten straining to urinate with little or no results, or crying out when urinating, please contact the foster coordinator immediately because it may be indicative of an infection or a urethral obstruction, which can be life-threatening.

Diarrhea. In kittens, it can be tricky to determine if diarrhea is a problem. Soft stool diarrhea, most likely caused by stress, is normal for the first two days after you take kittens home. Kittens who are nursing tend to have loose stool, but if it is watery or very large in volume, that's a concern. By the time kittens are five weeks old and are eating consistently on their own, they should have firm, normal stool. If your foster kittens have liquid stool, please contact the foster department so that a vet appointment can be scheduled; the kittens may need medication.

Once your kittens are using a litter box, please monitor the box daily. Remember that diarrhea will dehydrate your kittens, so be proactive about contacting the foster department if you notice any diarrhea. If a kitten has bloody or mucoid diarrhea, please contact the foster coordinator immediately and start the emergency phone protocol.

Frequent ear scratching. A foster kitten may have ear mites if she scratches her ears often and/or shakes her head frequently, or if you see a dark discharge that resembles coffee grounds when you look in her ears. Ear mites can be treated by a veterinarian, so please call or email the foster coordinator for an appointment.

Hair loss. Please contact the foster department if you notice any hair loss on your foster kittens. It is normal for cats to have thin fur around the lips, eyelids and in front of the ears, but clumpy patches of hair loss or thinning hair can indicate ringworm or dermatitis.

Serious kitten ailments

- Fading kitten syndrome: Symptoms include unwillingness to eat, dehydration, lethargy, weight loss, coldness to the touch, and difficulty with breathing or labored breathing.
- Panleukopenia (feline distemper): Symptoms include unwillingness to eat, vomiting, diarrhea and/or dehydration. The diarrhea often has a mucoid texture and/or is bloody.

If a kitten is displaying any combination of the symptoms listed above, please contact the foster coordinator immediately and start the emergency phone protocol. These ailments can be fatal if left untreated.

Criteria for emergencies

What constitutes a medical emergency in a kitten? A good rule of thumb is any situation in which you would call 911 for a person. Here are some specific symptoms that could indicate an emergency:

- Not breathing or labored breathing
- Symptoms of fading kitten syndrome or distemper
- Signs of extreme dehydration: dry gums, weakness, vomiting, not urinating, skin tenting
- Abnormal lethargy or unable to stand
- Unconsciousness or unable to wake up
- Cold to the touch
- Broken bones
- Any trauma: hit by a car, dropped, stepped on, etc.
- A large wound or profuse bleeding that doesn't stop when pressure is applied

- Loss of appetite for more than 12 hours

If a foster kitten displays any of these symptoms, please follow the emergency phone protocol. If the animal is vomiting or has diarrhea, but is still active, eating and drinking, you can probably wait until the next day to get help. However, if the animal is lethargic and shows no interest in food or water, start the emergency phone protocol.

If you think your foster pet may incur permanent damage or pass away if not seen by a veterinarian immediately, please proceed to the approved emergency clinic and start the emergency phone chain on the way.

*For quick references, FAQs, or other foster resources please visit our website at www.dorchesterpaws.org

