

# CARING FOR KITTENS UNDER 5 WEEKS

This guide will provide you with the information you need to care for kittens under 5 weeks of age who require bottle feeding. Should you have any questions or require advice please don't hesitate to contact Animal Welfare League NSW on (02) 8899 3333.

## >> Get Started

When you find stray kittens the best thing you can do is wait and see if the mother cat is still looking after them. Kittens with their mother have a much better survival rate than those who are taken away too early as their mother's milk contains precious antibodies, however, sometimes there are medical or behavioural reasons to separate the mother from her kittens, including:

- Mum is not taking care of the kittens. Warning signs include: not nursing, not responding to kittens' crying and staying away from crying kittens
- Mum is taking care of the kittens but there are medical concerns for the Mum, or kittens, which warrant separation. This is not very common – our vet staff can talk you through any concerns on (02) 8777 4424

You can tell if a mother cat is still caring for her kittens by the state of the kittens/nest. If the kittens are calm, plump and sleeping quietly in a heap, odds are their Mum is still around and they should be left alone or caught together with her. Abandoned kittens will be dirty, the nest will be soiled and they will cry continuously from hunger.

Assuming there is no mother cat around (and you have made absolute sure of this), the first step to take is to try and identify how old the kittens are. You can use the below guide:

**Just Born:** Kittens should weigh about 100 grams and their umbilical cord will fall off 3 days after birth. They are both blind and deaf and cannot urinate or defecate on their own.

**One Week:** Kittens eyes will be closed and their ears folded over. They cannot walk and they sleep 90% of time (nursing the other 10%).

**Two Weeks:** Kittens eyes begin to open around 10-14 days old and you will see they are blue. Their ears will also open and stand up and they should begin to knead and crawl.

**Three Weeks:** Kittens true eye colour may start to appear and their eyesight will improve. They'll start taking their first wobbly steps and you may notice their canines coming through.



**Four Weeks:** Kittens should be able to urinate and defecate without help (litter box training will begin) and you can start weaning them. They'll begin to explore their environment, play with littermates, dig and be able to roll over and get back up.

**Five Weeks:** The kittens back teeth should start to come through and they'll be able to munch on solid food.

If the kittens are of bottle-feeding age (under 5 weeks) they will be easy to round up and care for. If their mother is still around, however, you will need to hire or borrow a cat trap from an equipment hire place or a rescue group so she can stay with them.

## >> Preparing

To prepare to look after bottle-fed kittens you will need the following:

- Kitten formula from a vet or pet store (Divetelact, Wombaroo, Biolac pink and blue etc.) (Please note: Whiskas cat milk and cow's milk do not have enough nutrients to sustain kittens)
- A nursing kit containing bottles, extra nipples and a cleaning brush (cut an 'X' in the tip of your first nipple with scissors). Wombaroo bottles and teats are generally the best and the easiest for kittens to latch onto. Some of the bottles you get from Pet Barn or the vet clinics may be hard and difficult for young kittens to suckle on.
- A kitchen scale (available from any department store)
- A carrier or cage with fresh, washed, bedding and a hot water bottle or mild heat pad
- Baby wipes
- Towels



Bottle-fed kittens need to be kept separated from other pets to stop the transfer of disease. If they aren't with their Mum they should be kept in a carrier or cage with bedding and a heat source to keep them warm (make sure the carrier is large enough for the kittens to have an area to move away from the heating pad if they are too warm). Keeping kittens warm is equal to keeping them fed as they use their mother and litter mates to keep warm when they are young as they can't generate their own body heat. Never feed a kitten that is cold. Instead warm them up slowly first using a heat pad/bottle and 3 layers of bedding.

## >> Feeding

**Bottle-fed kittens need to be fed around-the-clock** (every two hours for kittens 0 - 1 week old, every 3 hours for kittens 1 - 2.5 weeks old, every 4 hours for kittens 2.5 - 3 weeks old and every 6 hours for kittens over three weeks that are learning to eat solids). For this reason you need to make sure you can commit to the time. To bottle feed the kittens, follow these steps:

1. Follow the directions on the formula pack to make up the formula. Kittens should be consuming 32 milliliters (mls) per 100g of weight, per day. Use the measurements on your bottle or syringe to keep track.
2. Never feed a kitten on its back as kittens fed on their back can easily swallow the milk into their lungs and asphyxiate. The kitten should be on their stomach in a position similar to how they would lay next to their mother to nurse. You may try holding the kitten upright swaddled in a warm towel or have the kitten lay on a towel in your lap. Experiment with what position works best for you and the kitten.
3. 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.
4. Allow the kitten to suckle at their own pace. If a kitten refuses to suckle, try stroking the kitten's back or gently rubbing her on her forehead. This stroking is similar to momma cat's cleaning and it may stimulate the kitten to nurse.

5. If you are feeding multiple kittens, feed the first kitten until they stop nursing, then begin feeding the next kitten and so on. Once you have fed all the kittens, feed the first kitten again and repeat with all the kittens. Do not overfeed as this can cause diarrhea and bloat.
6. Kittens need to be burped, just like human babies. Lay the kitten on their stomach, on your shoulder or in your lap, and very gently pat their back until you hear a little burp. You may need to burp a couple times per feeding.
7. Formula that has been kept in the refrigerator must be warmed to just above room temperature. Place the bottle in a bowl of shallow water, then heat in the microwave for 10 seconds. Or you may place the bottle in a bowl of hot water for a few minutes.



**When the kittens are ready to be weaned (4 weeks old), you can follow these steps, as well as keeping out a bowl of fresh water:**

1. Start by offering the kittens formula on a spoon or your hands.
2. Once they are lapping off the spoon, try putting some formula in a saucer.
3. As they master lapping up the formula out of the saucer, you can gradually add a small amount of canned food to the formula in the saucer.
4. Increase the amount of canned food slowly, adding more food and less formula. Some kittens catch on right away, others may take a few days. To be sure the kittens are getting enough food, you may need to continue bottle feeding them a few times a day, until they are eating well on their own. Be sure to feed them what they need to be full, but don't overfeed them.

5. Monitor the kittens' stools to make sure they are tolerating and digesting the mix well. If the kittens have loose stools, reduce the amount of canned food and increase the formula until their systems have adjusted.
6. You can also start leaving out dry food for them to try once they hit 5 weeks. It's best to start with babycat biscuits as they are smaller, however pro plan is great too as long as it's soaked a little to make it a bit easier to chew.

## >> Toileting

Mother cats toilet their kittens by stimulating their bowels until they are able to do it themselves (around 4 weeks of age). Kittens without a mother therefore require your help in this department. To toilet a kitten:

1. After each feeding, use a warm, moist cotton ball, tissue or soft cloth to gently rub and clean the kitten's lower belly, genital and anal area. The kitten should begin eliminating within a minute. Do not continue to rub the kitten for more than a minute or so, since this could irritate their delicate skin. If you find your kitten becomes sick and regurgitates the milk back up after toileting then toilet before feeding for the first week.
2. Gently wash the kitten after they're done eliminating using a clean, damp, soft cloth. Record the kittens' elimination type and frequency in a logbook.

3. Kittens should urinate after each feeding and have a bowel movement one to four times a day.
4. When they are between 3 and 4 weeks of age, kittens can be introduced to the litter box. Use a small cardboard box or plastic litter box with just enough clay litter to cover the bottom - Don't use clumping litter. Adding a used cotton ball (from when you helped them urinate) to the box will help them get the idea of what to do next.
5. Put the kittens in the box, allowing them to get the feel for the litter. Natural instinct will generally prevail and the kittens will begin investigating, scratching, and, within a few days, using the box. If they are having trouble understanding how to use the litter and you have an older cat, you can scoop some soiled litter into the kittens tray so they will smell that and start to understand where they are supposed to go. If they do have an accident it is best to clean it up ASAP as the longer the smell stays around the more likely the kittens will be to think that is the appropriate place to toilet.

## >> Monitoring

Healthy kittens should put on 10-15 grams a day – it's important to monitor their weight daily using the kitchen scale as a lack of increase (or indeed a decrease) can signify a health issue. Make sure you weigh the kittens at the same time each day and write their weight down.

You will also need to monitor their general health and look out for signs indicating something could be wrong. One way to do this is by monitoring their stool against the following charts.



COLOUR	DESCRIPTION	ACTION
Bloody	Actual red blood seen in stool. Could indicate panleukepenia.	Grossly abnormal, must be seen ASAP.
Mucous	Yellowish/white/clear slimy substance. Indicates severe bowel irritation.	Grossly abnormal and needs immediate care.
Black	True dark black colour to stool. Usually indicates bleeding high in the bowel.	Severe sign, needs immediate attention.
Brown	Normal colour. Be happy!	
Orange	Usually indicates way too much bile in stool, can occur with reflux.	Seek medical advice.
Yellow	Almost always indicates bacterial imbalance in the bowel. If has diarrhea also, usually related to coccidia.	Seek medical advice.
White	Grossly abnormal color, usually indicates, severe bacterial imbalance and severe infection in the bowel.	Kitten at risk of dying, needs medical attention ASAP.



CONSISTENCY	DESCRIPTION	ACTION
Dry/hard	Abnormal, usually indicates dehydration.	Seek care promptly.
Firm	Normal, be happy.	
Formed but soft	Low range of 'normal'. If stools change from firm to soft you should seek medical advice.	
Toothpaste	Still has somewhat tubular form but falls apart once touched.	Abnormal, needs medication.
Cow-patty	Never formed but thick enough it falls into a 'cow-patty' shape.	Abnormal, animal is at significant risk and needs immediate attention.
Liquidy	Just fluid that falls out of rectum, thin and may have mucous.	Abnormal, animal is at severe risk and must be seen immediately.
The 'squirts'	Animal has no control over bowel and watery fluid squirts out of rectum.	Grossly abnormal, animal in danger of dying, must be seen immediately!

URINE COLOUR	DESCRIPTION	ACTION
Red/Dark Orange		Severe sign. Severe at-risk, must be seen immediately.
Dark yellow/ almost brown	Extreme dehydration or bilirubin in urine.	Either way it's BAD! Needs immediate aggressive treatment.
Dark yellow/ almost brown	Concentrated urine. Animal is not getting enough fluid for total body hydration.	Needs immediate care.
Yellow	Mildly concentrated urine.	Monitor closely and if ANY other signs, seek care immediately.
Light yellow	Mildly dilute urine. Overall body hydration should be adequate if no kidney disease.	
Pale yellow	Dilute urine. Hydration should be excellent if no kidney disease.	
Almost clear	Severely dilute urine. Risk of over-hydration. Urine should only be this dilute if under constant medical supervision.	

SITUATION	WHAT TO DO
Kittens are losing weight, not very energetic and/or having diarrhea	Make a medical appointment to have the kittens seen ASAP. Kittens are so small that any weight loss is significant.
Kittens are having liquid diarrhea for more than 12 hours	Make a medical appointment to have the kittens seen right away. Bring the stool sample. Diarrhea can cause dehydration which can kill the kittens. If the kittens are having liquid diarrhea, are not eating well and are not energetic, this could be an emergency and you need to contact a vet ASAP.
Kittens are not eating, don't seem interested in food but are energetic	Try adding BBQ chicken or tuna.

Kittens are having very soft stool but are eating and energetic	Collect a stool sample. The fresher the sample the better, if you are unable to take it immediately to a vet, place it in the refrigerator. If there are any parasites a vet will give you medication.
Kittens are not losing weight, but are not gaining weight	If the kittens are energetic, eating well and not having diarrhea, keep monitoring them. If they don't gain weight in 24 hours or if their appetite or energy level drops, contact a vet.
Kittens are sneezing and having thick or yellow/green discharge	Make a medical appointment. Warm up their wet food, if the kittens can't smell the food they won't eat.
Kittens eyes look weepy and are red or having green/yellow discharge.	Make a medical appointment. In the meantime, use a cotton ball or soft cloth to gently clean the eyes (don't rub!) of any discharge and apply a warm compress for a few minutes once or twice a day.

## >>> Socialising

It is important you socialise the kittens so they are ready for adoption as soon as they are old enough. Some socialisation tips include:

1. Kittens should receive 2+ 20 minute sessions daily with interactive toys and people (don't leave these toys unattended however, but make sure to leave safe solo toys like ping pong balls)
2. Change up the environment in small ways by adding cardboard boxes or moving things around – this gets them use to change
3. Encourage affectionate behavior and be sure to get them use to human touch and being brushed
4. Introduce them to new people when possible

## >>> Adopting

Ideally, if you can look after the kittens until they reach 1KG, their chances of finding a home quickly are much greater. Rescue groups like ours may help you rehome them. Please call us on (02) 8899 3333 to discuss



\*\*information adapted from AWL NSW staff, AWL NSW kitten foster carer guide, Best Friends society and NYC Feral Cat.