

Sara Patton's Orphan Kitten Reference Guide

DISCLAIMER: Any information included in this guide does not replace advice from a veterinarian. These are notes blended from my personal experience and research.

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INTRODUCTION

This reference guide is not meant to be everything you need to know about caring for orphan kittens. This is just basic information to help you figure out where to start.

I usually foster through the Atlanta Humane Society, so my experience is based on their standard operating procedures. Some protocols vary by vet or organization, so always consult a vet and include your foster organization in the discussion.

DISCLAIMER: Any information included in this guide does not replace advice from a veterinarian. These are notes from my personal experience blended with information I've gathered from other resources. I also included a lot of information from Hannah Shaw (also known as The Kitten Lady). She has a book that you should read, *TINY BUT MIGHTY*, and a ton of information available for free on her website (kittenlady.org) and YouTube channel. She recorded four webinars that give an excellent overview of caring for orphan kittens (available on her website for free).

REQUIRED SUPPLIES

The following sections explain why you need these supplies and how to use them, but here is a quick checklist to prepare for your new fosters. It's organized by age of the kitten – most of what you need for newborns you will need for the next 8 weeks of fostering, but you will need additional supplies as the kittens grow.

Weeks 0+

General

- Carrier
- Heat source
- Blankets
- Formula (KMR)
- Miracle nipple
- Syringes or bottles
- Tissues
- Baby wipes
- Mason jar with lid or something else to make formula in
- Shaker ball to mix formula
- Scale that weighs in grams
- Toothbrushes (to teach them to groom)
- Disinfectant (such as Rescue wipes and liquid)
- Snuggle Kitty with beating heart or other stuffed animal (not a necessity)

Medicine and other optional but useful health supplies to have on hand

- Strongid – see section *PHYSICAL HEALTH: ROUTINE PREVENTATIVE CARE* later in this guide for more information
- Marquis – see section *PHYSICAL HEALTH: ROUTINE PREVENTATIVE CARE* later in this guide for more information
- 1 mL syringes for dosing meds
- Karo syrup – used if a kitten is hypoglycemic (has low blood sugar)
- Probiotics – for diarrhea or constipation (further information in sections on health covered later); one commonly used brand is PetAG Bene-bad Plus and can be bought as a powder or gel
- Flavorless Pedialyte – can be used to treat dehydration
- High calorie nutritional gel – This is not a replacement for actual food but can be used as a supplement for kittens who are finicky eaters or require an additional source of energy. Some brands such as PetAG specify to only use their product for kittens older than 8 weeks. The brand Tomlyn does not have an age limit, so if you don't know what else to try, this is worth a shot at getting some substance in a kitten who won't eat anything.

Weeks 3+

- Non-clumping litter (clumping can cause a blockage if eaten)
- Litter box (something with short sides at first)
- Playpen / larger area than a carrier to roam in

Weeks 4+

- Toys with nothing on them they can accidentally swallow
- FVRCP vaccine
- 3 mL syringes
- Needles (make sure you have the right gauges – you'll need a larger gauge to draw up the vaccine and a smaller gauge to administer it)

Weeks 5+

- Canned kitten food
- Dry food
- Shallow dishes for food and water (I recommend a muffin tin to feed if you have more than one kitten – once they are big enough to use it, it's the easiest way to feed a large number of kittens at the same time and the least amount of dishes.)

SO, YOU'VE GOT BOTTLE BABIES... WHAT NOW?!

First, assess the situation.

1. Are they warm enough?

This is always the first thing you need to ask yourself. Don't try to feed a kitten first even if that's your gut reaction. Kittens can't swallow as well when they are cold, so the formula might accidentally go down its airway which is dangerous. Additionally, the food can curdle in its stomach if a kitten is too cold which can sometimes lead to death. Get them warm first! Reference the temperature guide if you have the tools to be exact, but a good rule of thumb is that they should be warmer than you think they should be.

2. Complete your overall assessment.

Refer to the section *ASSESSING A KITTEN'S CONDITION* later in this guide for details on how to complete the assessment. In short, you need to determine the basic facts about the kitten (such as age and health status) to know how to proceed and what kind of care you need to provide.

3. Make their home (if you haven't already).

- Kittens 3 weeks or younger: these babies are tiny, and you only need a small space for them to live in. It can be a typical pet carrier (one with a top opening is the most convenient) or even just a plastic tub (*WARNING*: Never close the lid if you use a plastic tub – you can leave the lid off or cut large holes in the lid so that there is always enough oxygen). A more expensive option is an incubator that can heat the kittens' environment to the exact temperature it should be.

Your tiny kitten home needs:

- A heat source, but give them enough space that they can move away from the heat source if they get too hot (unless you're using an incubator which is the heat source)
 - A soft blanket – make sure the blanket covers the heat source so they can't burn themselves
 - A stuffed animal – optional to also include a beating heart which is especially comforting for single orphan kittens
- Kittens 3 weeks and older: they need more room to roam as well as access to a litter box, so you need a larger space for them. However, they still don't need access to your whole house (or even an entire room). You can use a playpen or gate off an area for them. Since they're learning to use a litter box, it's easier if you contain the accidents to a smaller area. It's also easier to sanitize a smaller area if the kitten gets sick and you have to disinfect everything it has had contact with.

- When your kittens are ready, you can give them access to an entire room or your house – it'll be different for every litter, so use your best judgement (and be prepared to clean up after them when they're in a new room and forget where the litter box is).

Next, help them use the bathroom and feed them.

The steps below will be your routine for every feeding. Kittens need food constantly throughout the day (and overnight) until they are old enough to eat on their own. Use the chart in the section *KITTEN WEIGHT & FEEDING CHART BY AGE* to determine how many hours apart you can schedule feedings depending on the kitten's age.

1. Stimulate them to help them use the bathroom.

Normally, a mama cat will lick a kitten's butt to stimulate them to pee and/or poop. If the kitten is orphaned though, that's now your job. Use a tissue (something soft – don't use a paper towel or over time they will develop irritation) and gently rub or pat their butts. Usually a kitten pees before every feeding. It should be clear or light yellow if they are properly hydrated. Kittens typically poop about once per day, but it can be more frequent. See the section on kitten poop for more information on this. When a kitten is about to poop, you'll feel their stomach muscles start to contract – do not stop stimulating or the kitten will stop trying to poop. Keep stimulating to the side of the butt (not directly over where they are trying to poop).

Note: some people stimulate before and after feeding. That's what the Kitten Lady recommends. However, I usually just stimulate before feedings and only after if I think they need it (like maybe they almost pooped before but not quite – they might go after eating). Whatever you choose, at least make them comfortable to eat by stimulating before. It is vital to stimulate at every mealtime – they can't pee or poop without your help. That wouldn't be fun!

2. Get a weight.

You cannot eyeball the tiniest changes to a kitten's weight that could signal something is wrong, so you need to use a scale and track its weight. A healthy kitten gains about 7-14 grams every 24 hours, but every kitten is different.

Start with weighing kittens at least twice a day (morning and night) to ensure that they are gaining weight appropriately. If you have a very young or unhealthy kitten, you should get its weight more frequently (every mealtime). Changes can happen quickly, and you want to be aware of any signs that the kitten's health is declining immediately.

I weigh my kittens after they've gone to the bathroom but before they've eaten to get their true weight. Use a tracker in Excel (I have a template in Google Sheets that I can share) or use a notepad.

If your kitten is at least 3-4 weeks old and has been healthy the past couple of weeks, then you can decrease the frequency you weigh it to once a day. Make sure you're weighing around the same time every day to be able to tell if it's gaining weight appropriately.

3. Feed them.

See the section *HOW TO FEED KITTENS* later in this guide for how to properly feed a kitten. It is very important to get this right. You can learn by reading about it and watching videos, but do your research before you attempt to feed a kitten. Even feeding a kitten incorrectly just one time is risking health complications and even death (but don't be scared; just do your research).

4. Burp them.

Depending on how you're feeding the kitten, it might get air in its gut. However, if they are burping a lot when you feed them, it's possible you're feeding them in the incorrect position – they shouldn't be getting a lot of air in them every time they feed. You can burp them after they eat by gently patting them on the back – you can put them on your hand if they're small enough or over your shoulder.

5. Let them sleep.

A newborn kitten needs around 23 hours of sleep. When you're not feeding it, it should be sleeping. I know they're cute and you want to cuddle them, but they need their rest (and you will too!). Even at 8 weeks, kittens are still sleeping around 20 hours a day.

ASSESSING A KITTEN'S CONDITION

You need to do this assessment as soon as you receive a kitten. Continue using the guidance below to monitor the kitten's health all the way up until adoption. See further details on some of the specific health issues that you might encounter during the assessment in the section *PHYSICAL HEALTH: COMMON HEALTH ISSUES* later in this guide.

1. Temperature – ALWAYS THE FIRST STEP

Before you do anything else, make sure the kitten is warm. Kittens under 4 weeks old or in poor health can't regulate their own body heat, and they would typically be kept warm by a mother. The greatest immediate risk to an orphan kitten is hypothermia regardless of the weather.

If you don't have a thermometer on hand, feel the pads of its paws or its ears – if they feel cool to the touch, then the kitten isn't warm enough. You need to act immediately to get it warm. Warm it up gradually over about 20 minutes. You can use a heating pad or heating discs; in a pinch, you can also microwave uncooked

rice in a sock. If you have nothing else, hold the kitten against your bare skin and use your body heat to warm it.

It's less likely, but also possible that a kitten could be too hot if it has been exposed to extreme temperatures. Cool it down gradually.

Age (weeks)	Kitten Temp (Fahrenheit)	Environment Temp (Fahrenheit)
0	95 - 97°	90°
1	97 - 98°	88°
2	98 - 99°	85°
3	99 - 100°	80°
4	99 - 101°	70 - 75°
5+	100 - 101°	70 - 75°

2. Temperament

- Should be active, alert, responsive – lethargy is cause for concern; even a newborn kitten responds to being handled
- Can lift its head
- Vocalizing
- Age appropriate movement of limbs

3. Body composition

- Healthy = full, rounded face and a plump belly that is soft and pliable
- Unhealthy = thin with ribs and bones easily seen or a triangular head (muscle wasting)

4. Fur & skin

- Should be soft and clean
- Look for any wounds, abscesses, fur loss
- Fleas?
 - Comb with a flea comb – if you see a dirt-like residue that turns red when wet, the kitten almost definitely has fleas.
 - Fleas are sucking the blood from the kitten which can cause anemia (and can kill a kitten), so it's important to get rid of fleas.
 - Depending on the severity of the fleas, the kitten might need a flea bath. Dawn dish soap is great for killing fleas. Watch the Kitten Lady's YouTube video for how to do this properly (it's very important to learn how to give a kitten a bath properly before you attempt it yourself).

5. Mouth & gums

- Should be closed unless meowing or yawning
 - Open mouth breathing = overheating or serious distress
- Gums should be pink and wet

- White or bluish gums could indicate a lack of oxygen or anemia, and you should consult a vet
- Pale and/or dry gums could indicate hypoglycemia (the kitten has low blood sugar) and you can use a drop of Karo syrup or oral dextrose to quickly increase. See a vet if symptoms persist though.
- Does the kitten have a cleft palate? This is a birth defect that results in an abnormal opening between the mouth and the nasal-sinus cavity. The kitten may have difficulty eating and may blow milk bubbles out of the nose when nursing, so they won't grow properly. Look inside the kitten's mouth – if there is a split in the roof of the mouth, this is a cleft palate.
 - Consult a vet immediately – depending on the severity, the prognosis sometimes isn't great for kittens with this condition; might require surgery if that's an option.

6. Eyes

- If the kitten is under 8-12 days of age, its eyes will not be open yet
 - It is important that they remain closed until they open on their own because the eyes are still developing.
 - Premature opening could damage the eyes and cause blindness.
- If the kitten's eyes are already open, they should be bright (not glossy)
- Whether open or closed, they should be clear of discharge; any discharge or crust around the eyes could indicate an eye infection

7. Ears

- Should be clean
- Look for signs of ear mites (dirt-like residue in ears)

8. Nose

- Should be no discharge or sneezing
- Does the airway sound clear? Is there any wheezing? Should be breathing easily and quietly

9. Urine

- You'll be able to check this the first time you stimulate them to go to the bathroom
- Should be a pale yellow or clear (if it's dark, that indicates dehydration)

10. Feces

- You'll also be able to check this when stimulating to use the bathroom
- Should be well formed (no diarrhea)
- While on a formula diet, a normal color is mustard yellow
- Should be about once a day, but could be more frequent for some kittens

11. Age

- See the section *DETERMING AGE* later in this guide on how to know a kitten's age. This will help you determine the proper care to give because it differs based on age.

12. Weight

- This will help you determine if the kitten is healthy for its age. See the section *KITTEN WEIGHT & FEEDING CHART BY AGE* later in this guide for a chart on what a healthy kitten should weigh by age.

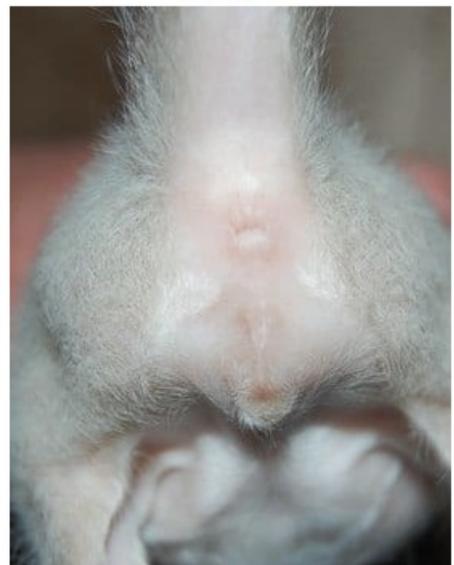
13. Sex

- Not important to know right away, but you'll want to check before advertising to potential adopters
- Can be difficult to tell on a newborn, but seeing the difference gets easier the older the kitten
- If you are looking at a kitten standing upright and lift its tale, you'll see the anus. By looking for other clues, you'll be able to determine the sex:
 - Female: below, fairly close to the anus, you'll see another hole that looks like a line or a teardrop – those are the kitten's female genitals (refer to the photos below for an example)
 - Male: there is more space between the anus and the male genitals – below the anus, there is a space of fur where the testicles will eventually be, and then there is a hole that is more of a circle (refer to the photos below for an example)

FEMALE



MALE



What to do after your assessment is complete – the Order of Operations

It can be overwhelming to know where to start if you get a kitten and it seems like everything is wrong, so follow this order of operations:

1. Assess and deal with any emergencies first. For example, if the kitten has a large wound and is bleeding profusely, obviously this must be dealt with before you can do anything else.
2. Get the kitten warm (refer to the temperature section discussed previously in the assessment guidance).
3. Hydrate and feed.
4. Address any non-emergency physical conditions.
5. Clean and wash the kitten if needed.

DETERMINING AGE

It's important to know how old your kitten is because its age will play a role in determining the type of care you need to provide. Age will influence what and how often you do feedings as well as what preventative meds you need to administer (vaccines, dewormers, etc.).

It can also help you determine if the kitten is healthy. For example, if you have a kitten that can't seem to figure out how to play with toys, but you've determined that the kitten is only 3 weeks old, then that's fine – 3 week old kittens haven't developed hand (paw) / eye coordination yet and don't typically play yet. However, if you had determined that the kitten was 6 weeks old and it isn't able to follow the toy with its eyes and swat at it, the kitten might have a health issue you need to address.

Newborns

- Eyes: closed
- Ears: folded (they cannot hear)
- Teeth: none
 - The teeth are how you can truly tell how old a kitten is. Sometimes the other characteristics of a kitten can vary for individual kittens, but you can truly tell the age by what teeth they have.
- Umbilical cord is most likely still attached (usually falls off at 4-5 days old)
- Temperature: 95 - 97° Fahrenheit; cannot thermoregulate (meaning that they can't maintain core internal temperature on their own), so you need to provide a heat source at all times to keep them warm; the kitten will move towards or away from the heat source on its own as needed

- Claws: nonretractable
- Temperament: writhe and make vocal sounds when picked up
- Weight (if at a healthy weight): 80 – 150 grams

One Week

- Eyes: open around 8-12 days old – their eyes start to open slowly from the tear duct out; the eye could be half open for a while before it completely opens; blue – all kittens are born with blue eyes that will eventually change to their adult color
- Ears: slightly unfolded (can hear but only a little)
- Teeth: none
- Umbilical cord: none (not even a stump of one)
- Temperature: 97 - 98° Fahrenheit; cannot thermoregulate (meaning that they can't maintain core internal temperature), so you need to provide a heat source at all times to keep them warm; the kitten will move towards or away from the heat source on its own as needed
- Claws: nonretractable
- Temperament: can hold their heads up, wiggle limbs, vocalize
- Weight (if at a healthy weight): 150 – 250 grams

Two Weeks

- Eyes: fully open; blue; enlarged pupils
- Ears: open, small, and rounded
- Teeth: none
- Temperature: 98 - 99° Fahrenheit; cannot thermoregulate (meaning that they can't maintain core internal temperature), so you need to provide a heat source at all times to keep them warm; the kitten will move towards or away from the heat source on its own as needed
- Claws: nonretractable
- Temperament: first steps, but wobbly and usually falls over
- Weight (if at a healthy weight): 250 – 350 grams

Three Weeks

- Eyes: blue
- Ears: begin to unfold and point upward
- Teeth: incisors (small teeth at the front of the mouth) begin to emerge – these teeth are used for grooming
- Temperature: 99 - 100° Fahrenheit; cannot thermoregulate (meaning that they can't maintain core internal temperature), so you need to provide a heat source at all times to keep them warm; the kitten will move towards or away from the heat source on its own as needed
- Claws: slowly begin retracting
- Temperament: might start to groom themselves (you can encourage this by brushing them with a toothbrush)
- Weight (if at a healthy weight): 350 – 450 grams

Four Weeks

- Eyes: blue; vision improving
- Ears: fully extending and hold themselves up like real cat ears
- Teeth: canines (long teeth to the sides of the incisors) begin emerging
- Temperature: 99 - 101° Fahrenheit; cannot thermoregulate (meaning that they can't maintain core internal temperature), so you need to provide a heat source at all times to keep them warm; the kitten will move towards or away from the heat source on its own as needed
- Claws: now fully retractable
- Temperament: walk, run, start to try to play with toys
- Weight (if at a healthy weight): 450 – 550 grams

Five Weeks

- Eyes: blue
- Teeth: premolars (teeth on the sides of the mouth) start to emerge – this indicates that they're ready to start weaning
- Temperature: 100 - 101° Fahrenheit; can thermoregulate on their own but should still be provided a heat source to use if they choose
- Claws: fully retractable
- Temperament: running and playing confidently
- Weight (if at a healthy weight): 550 – 650 grams

Six Weeks

- Eyes: blue
- Teeth: deciduous teeth (baby teeth) have all fully descended (kittens have 26 baby teeth)
- Temperature: 100 - 101° Fahrenheit; can thermoregulate on their own but can be provided an optional heat source if you want (especially if you keep your home cool)
- Temperament: social, pouncing, curious, jumping
- Weight (if at a healthy weight): 650 – 750 grams

Seven Weeks

- Eyes: start transitioning to their adult color
- Teeth: all 26 baby teeth are present
- Temperature: 100 - 101° Fahrenheit; can thermoregulate on their own but can be provided an optional heat if you want source (especially if you keep your home cool)
- Temperament: spike in energy (little kitten tornados!)
- Weight (if at a healthy weight): 750 – 850 grams

Eight Weeks

- Eyes: almost completely transitioned to their adult color
- Ears: proportional to body

- Teeth: still baby teeth; no adult teeth yet – adult teeth typically start to come in around 4 - 7 months and will gradually replace the baby teeth. Usually by the time the kitten reaches 6-7 months of age, all 30 adult teeth will have come in.
- Temperature: 100 - 101° Fahrenheit; can thermoregulate on their own but can be provided an optional heat source if you want (especially if you keep your home cool)
- Most rescue organizations will spay / neuter kittens at 8 weeks if they weigh at least 2 pounds.
- Weight (if at a healthy weight): 850 – 950 grams

HOW TO FEED KITTENS

Bottle / Syringe Feeding (for kittens under 5 weeks of age)

Please read further instructions from the Kitten Lady online or on her YouTube videos for how to feed bottle baby kittens – it is much easier to see it rather than read about it, and it's so, so important to get right. Below are my abbreviated instructions on how to bottle / syringe feed. You can use the kitten weight and feeding chart that I included in a later section as a reference guide. If the kitten is old enough for solid food (at least 5 weeks old), then refer to the section *WEANING* later in the guide.

Always make sure your feeding utensils (syringe, bottle, nipple, dishes, etc.) have been properly sanitized. It's an easy place for bacteria to develop, and you could risk the health of your kittens by not cleaning your supplies.

What to feed bottle baby kittens

- Always give your kittens formula meant specifically for kittens (don't use cow's milk or goat's milk as a replacement).
- KMR is a commonly used brand of kitten formula, and you can buy it as a powder or a premade liquid. I recommend the powdered form because it's cheaper and lasts longer.
- Once opened, the powdered formula needs to be kept refrigerated (it's fine to leave out of the refrigerator if it is unopened).
- Check the instructions for how long you can store it for once opened, but it's usually a couple of months.
- If you're using a powdered formula, follow the instructions on the can to prepare the formula.
- Only make enough formula for what you'll use in the next 24 hours – you can't store formula that has already been mixed for longer than that.
- Make sure the result is smooth formula that doesn't have clumps. Use a shaker ball (the kind you would use when making a protein shake) to smooth out the mixture.

- Keep any leftovers refrigerated, but make sure to discard any formula that you don't use within 24 hours of mixing it.

How to feed bottle baby kittens

- Never feed a kitten on its back – it should be in belly down posture (kind of like upward dog yoga position).
- Be very careful not to force them to eat. They need to be swallowing or they could aspirate (breathe in the formula and get it in their lungs).
- You can use a bottle or a syringe – it is up to you and the kitten what works best. I personally prefer a syringe because you can measure more exactly and there is less air that gets into the kitten's system.
- Use a Miracle Nipple if you can – it fits a bottle or a syringe. The bottles come with nipples, but they don't have holes cut in them. You can cut a hole yourself, but you have to be very careful the formula doesn't come out too slowly or too quickly, so instead, you can use a miracle nipple that fits in the screw cap of the bottle so that there's less room for error.
 - Miracle Nipples come in two sizes – one has a longer nipple than the other. If you get both, you can test each out to see which one is easiest for your kitten to use when feeding. However, usually either one will get the job done. Switching is something you could try though if you have a kitten who is finicky about eating.
- If you use a syringe, use a Miracle Syringe if you can. They have O-rings so that it slides easier and will last for more feedings than a normal syringe that isn't meant for feeding. However, any syringe that you can pop a nipple on will work in a pinch.
- See the chart in the section *KITTEN WEIGHT & FEEDING CHART BY AGE* later in this guide for how much and how often to feed – it depends on weight (and loosely age).
- Sometimes they don't want the nipple, so squeeze a little formula out to give them a taste so they will realize what's going on.
- If they latch, great, but still be very intentional about how slowly you're feeding – you want to go at the kitten's speed (very slowly). You're just putting a tiny bit of pressure on the syringe or bottle to keep the flow moving. The kitten should be suckling and swallowing.
- Sometimes the kitten doesn't latch which is also okay. You can feed them drop by drop as long as they are still swallowing.
- Put a finger lightly on the kitten's throat while you're feeding to ensure that it is swallowing the entire time it's feeding.
- Never feed a kitten that can't or won't swallow.
- You need to exercise patience – if you try to force feed, it could cause aspiration which is when they inhale liquid and it can lead to all sorts of problems.
- Often the kitten will tell you when they're done, and if they've had a good meal, then you can stop until their next feeding.

Weaning (for kittens 5 weeks and older)

Again, you'll want to do further research and watch some videos on this yourself.

What to feed your weaning kittens

- You will still use formula in the beginning (see above)
- You also need canned food now as well – always use a canned food that is made specifically for *kittens* and not adult cat food.
- Also get dry food for them to graze on as they wean – again, make sure the food is specifically for *kittens* and not for adult cats.

How to wean your kittens

- If you have a mama cat, this process will happen naturally. Kittens will begin to explore the food their mom is eating, and they continue to nurse on their mama while they learn to eat solid food.
- If you have orphan kittens, you can start weaning them when their premolars start to emerge (around 5 weeks of age). Sometimes out of necessity they can start weaning slightly earlier, but it's best to wait until they get their premolars because this indicates that they are ready to digest the canned food.
- Weaning is at least a 7-day process. At each feeding, you'll start by trying to get them to eat solid food, and then you'll give them formula until they are full. When the kitten first starts weaning, you can mix canned kitten food with formula and gradually reduce the amount of formula you're adding until they're eating only the canned food (remember to only use canned food made specifically for kittens).
- It's important to continue weighing your kittens during this time even if they are completely healthy. It is hard to tell how much a kitten is eating or if they are eating at all. Some kittens "meat nurse" and try to eat by sucking on the food, but they aren't getting any food. Be patient with them – chewing is a new skill and different than the nursing they are used to.
- During this time, you should also put out some dry food for them to have free access to (again, specifically made for kittens and not cats). Some kittens will take right to it, and some take time to start eating dry food. Also make sure they always have access to plenty of fresh water.

KITTEN WEIGHT & FEEDING CHART BY AGE

Use the quick reference chart below as a guide and not a rule book – every kitten is different and will determine their own normal. Some meals they might eat more than the suggested amount and some meals they might eat less. The important thing is that they are gaining weight every day – that's how you'll be able to tell they are getting enough food. A healthy kitten gains about 7-14 grams every 24 hours.

If the kitten eats less some feedings but its weight is still trending upwards, don't worry about forcing them to eat. It can upset them and might cause aspiration. If a kitten is constantly eating a lot less than the suggested amount below, this might be cause for concern. Try to get them to eat more by giving them a drop at a time (as long as they are still swallowing). Be calm and soothing when trying to get them to eat because forcing a kitten to eat too often can end up with them hating mealtime, and that will lead to them eating even less. Try to figure out if there's an underlying reason they aren't eating well.

A kitten will usually stop nursing when it is finished eating. If they've had enough formula based on the guidelines below, then you don't need to keep trying to get them to eat more. Overfeeding can lead to diarrhea. However, some kittens will eat more than the suggested amount every meal, and that's okay – you don't need to be exact. A well-fed kitten's belly should be round, but not hard or distended. Most kittens don't eat to the point of overfeeding, so you can usually let them choose when they stop.

Age (weeks)	Healthy Weight (grams)	Amt per feeding (mL)	Schedule (hours)
0-1	75 - 150	2 - 6	Every 2 hours
1-2	150 - 250	6 - 10	Every 2 - 3 hours
2-3	250 - 350	10 - 14	Every 3 - 4 hours
3-4	350 - 450	14 - 18	Every 4 - 5 hours
4-5	450 - 550	18 - 22	Every 5 - 6 hours
5-6	550 - 650	Weaning	Every 6 hours
6-8	650 - 850	Solid food	Every 6 hours

ALL ABOUT POOP: THE SECRET TO YOUR KITTEN'S HEALTH

The information below helps explain what a normal kitten poop should look like and should help to identify when there is cause for concern. It's important to remember that the only way to know for sure what the actual problem is and how to treat it is to consult a vet. The vet can do a fecal test and give you a diagnosis and treatment. Make sure you collect a stool sample to bring with you to the vet – they can't do any tests without the poop!

For further information about the health issues mentioned below, refer to the section *PHYSICAL HEALTH: COMMON HEALTH ISSUES* later in this guide.

Part 1: Colors

If you have no other reason to read the Kitten Lady's book, *TINY BUT MIGHTY*, you need to read it just to see her Color Wheel of Poop. She's seriously brilliant.

- Brown
 - Brown poop (that is also well formed) is normal and healthy! Yay!

- HOWEVER, if the brown poop is loose and smelly, this indicates an internal parasite.
 - Get a fecal test and administer medication to treat the specific parasite.
- Yellow
 - Mustard-yellow (that is also well formed) is normal if the kitten is on a formula diet or a mama cat's milk. Yay!
 - HOWEVER, if it is loose and smelly, this indicates an internal parasite.
 - Get a fecal test and administer medication to treat the specific parasite.
- Green
 - If it's just green, this might indicate a bacterial infection
 - Get an antibiotic prescribed by a vet for a bacterial infection
 - Probiotics can also help with bacterial infections
 - HOWEVER, if the poop is more of a yellow green, this could indicate giardia – does the kitten have other symptoms that point to giardia?
 - Consult with a vet to see if the kitten should be tested for giardia (a separate test than a normal fecal test) and treat with medication if needed
- Beige
 - Pale poop indicates failure to absorb nutrients from food
 - Sometimes just giving a probiotic or a pre-digestive enzyme will help
 - If the kitten just recently weaned, beige poop could also indicate that the kitten wasn't ready to be weaned yet
 - If this is a possibility, consider scaling back and feeding them formula again for a bit
 - Beige poop could also indicate overfeeding
 - Make sure that the kitten is eating the correct amount of formula each feeding
- Black
 - If the kitten is a true newborn, its first poop will be dark, tarry, black-green stool called meconium
 - If it's not its first ever poop and it's black, this could indicate bleeding in the upper GI tract. It could be from parasites or a virus or something else
 - Consult a vet immediately.
- Red
 - Usually indicates a problem in the lower GI tract
 - Could be anything from colitis to a bacterial infection
 - Consult a vet and let them know the symptoms.

Part 2: Textures

- Formed
 - Well-formed poop is healthy poop! Yay!
- Mucousy
 - Slimy, oily poop could indicate a protozoan parasite like coccidia or giardia
 - Give the kitten dewormers and get a fecal test
- Curdled
 - Could be indigestion because of parasites, bacteria, or difficulty absorbing fats and proteins from food
 - Make sure you're feeding the kitten fresh food appropriate for its age
 - Consider giving a probiotic or digestive enzyme
 - Get a fecal test if symptoms persist and treat for parasites if needed
- Liquid
 - NEEDS IMMEDIATE ATTENTION! Address liquid diarrhea as soon as possible!
 - Consult a vet immediately
 - Could indicate a serious parasitic infection or something as severe as panleukopenia
 - Liquid diarrhea usually causes dehydration as well, so make sure you're keeping the kitten well hydrated
- Soft
 - Soft serve, loose / unformed could indicate a moderate GI issue
 - Administer dewormers
 - If symptoms persist, get a fecal test.
- Hard
 - Dry and hard poop indicates severe dehydration or can be a sign of motility (the organs aren't functioning)
 - Hydrate the kitten and consult a vet

PHYSICAL HEALTH: ROUTINE PREVENTATIVE CARE

Work with a vet to determine what routine care you should provide (you'll need to get most of what I mention below from a vet anyway). Standard care varies from veterinarian to veterinarian. Rescue organizations have their own policies and procedures, so you should follow the protocols of the organization you are fostering through. There are also different standards for shelter animals than personal pets because animals in a shelter environment have greater risk of exposure to viruses, parasites, etc. The policies outlined below are from the Atlanta Humane Society. After

adoption, the cat's owner can work with their own veterinarian to decide what additional routine vaccines the cat needs (that I don't mention below) depending on its lifestyle.

First preventative care starting at 2 weeks of age

Below is the initial preventative care you will give a kitten when it reaches 2 weeks. However, if you get a new kitten that is already older than 2 weeks and you don't have background information to know what its already been treated with, you will still want to give them everything below just in case (it won't harm them if they did already receive it and you give it again).

1. Marquis

- Given one time as a preventative dewormer at 2 weeks of age or upon intake of kitten if the kitten is 16 weeks or younger
- If the kitten is older than 16 weeks, it does not receive Marquis as a preventative dewormer
- Also used to treat coccidia (see section *HEALTH* later in this guide for more information on coccidia and treatment)
- Dose: 0.2 mL per lb. for preventative care (dose is different to treat coccidia – again, see the section *HEALTH* later in this guide for more information on coccidia)

2. Strongid

- Kills roundworms and hookworms
- Available without a prescription from a vet
- Given at 2 weeks of age or upon intake of kitten and then given every 2 weeks until the kitten is 16 weeks old
- If the kitten or cat is older than 16 weeks, it's given once upon intake and then again 2 weeks later (2 doses total)
- Dose: 0.2 mL per lb.

Additional preventative care starting at 4 weeks of age

1. FVRCP vaccine

- First FVRCP vaccine is given at 4 weeks old as long as it weighs at least 1 pound – if the kitten doesn't weigh enough, give the first FVRCP vaccine as soon as it reaches 1 pound
- A booster FVRCP vaccine is given every 2 weeks until the kitten is 16 weeks old.
 - The last booster should be given on the day it reaches 16 weeks of age or after (if the kitten gets one a couple of days before it is 16 weeks old, it will still need one more booster)
- If the kitten is older than 16 weeks upon intake and there is no known history, the FVRCP vaccine is given once upon intake and again as a

booster 2 weeks later. If we know that the kitten / cat has been given the FVRCP vaccine before and is up to date, then it does not need a booster

- Administered in the right front shoulder as close to the leg as can safely be given (if the cat has a rare reaction to the vaccine and needs the leg amputated, it's better for the vaccine to have been given lower down on the leg)
- Needs to be given to cats annually for their entire lives

Further preventative care starting at 8 weeks of age

1. Flea and tick prevention

- First given when the kitten is at least 8 weeks old (not safe before that) and then given every month for the rest of its life
- Important: pregnant or nursing mama cats cannot be given flea and tick prevention because it is passed on to their kittens and is toxic to kittens under 8 weeks old
- Some brands are a combination treatment and prevent fleas, ticks, and heartworms (sometimes they also prevent some parasites), but some brands only treat one or the other, so know which one you have
- With some brands, the treatment is given orally as a chewable pill, but with cats, the treatment is usually topical
 - If you're using a topical treatment, you'll use the entire contents of the applicator tube. Apply the liquid to the cat's back between its shoulder blades. Try to apply it underneath the cat's hair and actually on its skin. Ideally, it's in a spot where the cat can't reach it to lick it off. Don't rub it in – let it soak in on its own.

2. Heartworm prevention

- Same guidelines as flea and tick prevention outlined above
- Not safe for pregnant or nursing mama cats

3. Spay and neutering

- Spayed (female) or neutered (male) when the kitten is at least 8 weeks old and at least 2 pounds

4. Microchipping

- Typically done when the kitten is spayed / neutered to help return a lost pet to its owner
- Not a GPS device – the microchip displays an identification code when it is scanned (most vets or shelters have a device to scan them), but this only helps if the lost cat is found by someone and taken somewhere to get the microchip scanned
- Very important for the adopter's information to be linked to the microchip's identification code and that the information is kept current in case the pet ever gets lost

Even more preventative care given after 12 weeks of age

1. Rabies vaccine

- Can only be administered by a licensed veterinarian
- Sometimes given at 12 weeks of age in a shelter environment, but often not given until 16 weeks of age
- Needs to be given to cats annually for their entire lives

PHYSICAL HEALTH: COMMON HEALTH ISSUES

The outline below doesn't even begin to cover everything you could encounter when caring for kittens. These are just the most common issues and a good place to start if your kitten doesn't seem completely healthy. Only a vet can diagnose your kitten. The outline below can help you know what symptoms to look for that indicate your kitten isn't 100% healthy. Again, please always talk to your vet.

Roundworms (GI Parasite)

- Symptoms: Some have no symptoms, but others have diarrhea or constipation and a lack of appetite
- Spread by: contact with infected stool of other animals or infected surfaces (such as soil or dirt)
- Treatment: Strongid should be given at 2 weeks old and every 2 weeks after that as part of the kitten's routine care. This will not only kill any roundworms present but also help to prevent them from getting more.

Hookworms (GI Parasite)

- Symptoms: weight loss, bloody stool, black stool, loss of appetite, sometimes wheezing or labored breathing
- Spread by: can infect the kitten directly through the skin or feet when walking on a surface (such as dirt) with hookworms present or by being ingested during the kitten's routine grooming
- Treatment: Strongid should be given at 2 weeks old and every 2 weeks after that as part of the kitten's routine care. This will not only kill any hookworms present but also help to prevent them from getting more.

Tapeworms (GI Parasite)

- Symptoms: stool with what looks like dried up rice (these are segments of the tapeworms that dry up after being passed); sometimes you'll also see tiny, thin live worms crawling in fresh stool or around the kitten's anus
- Spread by: usually transmitted when a cat ingests a flea during grooming; if the cat has fleas, it's common for it to also have tapeworms
- Treatment: usually just one pill, Droncit, will kill all tapeworms present

Coccidia (GI Parasite)

- Symptoms: watery diarrhea or diarrhea with mucous, bloody stool in severe cases, dehydration, sometimes vomiting
- Spread by: could be by direct contact with infected feces, but since coccidia isn't visible without a microscope, a cat can easily track the microscopic spores out of the litterbox all around the house infecting everything it touches; therefore, it's very important to sanitize anything a cat with coccidia could have come into contact with
- Treatment: Marquis or Albon (see further information on each in the next section, *MEDICATION INSTRUCTIONS AND DOSES: QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE*)

Giardia (GI Parasite)

- Symptoms: extremely foul smelling, yellow-green diarrhea that might be frothy or greasy, weight loss, dehydration, gassiness, bloating
- Spread by: an infected animal sheds cysts when it poops, and those cysts infect other animals when they are ingested or even just sniffed (commonly spread through water sources like puddles)
- Zoonotic disease: giardia is one of the rare parasite infections that can be transmitted across species (from cats to dogs, humans, etc.), so you need to be especially careful
- Treatment: metronidazole

Upper Respiratory Infection (URI)

- Symptoms: sneezing, coughing, discharge from eyes and/or nose

- Spread by: exchanging fluids or through the environment (example: food dishes or bedding used by a kitten with a URI will spread the URI to the next kitten to use it if it isn't properly sanitized first); the virus can survive in the environment if it's moist but will die when dried up
- Treatment: usually antibiotics; if the eyes are also infected, see treatment for eye infections below

Eye infection

- Symptoms: any discharge coming from the eye that looks like pus or crust; redness or swelling might also occur; other symptoms could indicate an upper respiratory infection (see URI above)
- Spread by: direct contact to an infected cat or via infected food dishes, bedding, etc. (very contagious)
- Treatment: first, clean away the discharge with a warm compress (warm water on a washcloth or cotton ball) – hold against their eye(s) until the crust is soft enough to wipe away (be careful to avoid covering the mouth or nose with the washcloth); then treat with an antibiotic from a vet (could come in an ointment or liquid form)

Ear mites

- Symptoms: dark waxy or crusty discharge from the ears (could look like very dirty ears), head shaking, scratching at ears
- Spread by: direct contact or through the environment
- Treatment: remove the debris from the ears and use a topical insecticide in the ear canal to kill off the remaining mites and any eggs

Panleukopenia (a.k.a. feline distemper; a.k.a. feline parvo)

- Symptoms: nausea, liquid diarrhea, dehydration, lethargy, high fever, anorexia, sudden death
- Spread by: contact with feces, urine, saliva, environment, any objects; can survive on objects for up to a year without proper sanitization
- Treatment: none, but you can treat the symptoms and hope they pull through although the prognosis is poor for most kittens with panleukopenia
 - Antibiotic decreases risk of further infection
 - Fluids (oral or subcutaneous) for dehydration

- Supplements (probiotics, vitamin B12, fiber etc.)
- Anti-nausea medication

Diarrhea (refer to the 2 sections on poop later in the guide for more detail)

- Diarrhea is not normal – it is indication that there is cause for concern
- Figure out the cause with the help of a vet and a fecal test
- Probiotics can help
- Leads to dehydration, so you can also give oral electrolytes (such as unflavored Pedialyte)

Constipation

- If a kitten hasn't pooped in 48 hours or longer, this is cause for concern
- You can try giving probiotics
- You can also add a tiny drop of mineral oil to their formula; however, be very careful in overdoing it with the mineral oil – you don't want to cause diarrhea by giving too much
- See vet if constipation continues – the kitten might need an enema or an x-ray if there is a possible blockage

Dehydration

- For kittens 4 weeks and older you can use a “tent test” done by pinching skin on the scruff of their neck – if it falls back into place immediately, they are not dehydrated, but if it takes a moment to fall back into place, this indicates dehydration
- Administer subcutaneous fluids or give oral electrolytes (such as flavorless Pedialyte)

Nursing on siblings or themselves

- This might not seem like cause for concern, but if you see this you need to address it immediately. If a kitten starts nursing on siblings or itself, it is usually habit-forming, and it will be very difficult to break the habit.
- Orphan kittens searching for something to nurse on often find their sibling's male genitals and suckle on them. Don't let your guard down though even if there aren't any male kittens in the litter – a suckler might choose a spot on another kitten's stomach, ear, etc. It can be anywhere.
- The suckler typically ends up ingesting waste from the kitten getting suckled, but even more concerning is that the suckling can cause a serious bladder infection for the kitten getting nursed on.
- You can help prevent this by feeding the kittens on time according to the schedule in the section *KITTEN WEIGHT & FEDDING CHART BY AGE* (they'll

be less likely to search for something else to nurse on between feedings if they aren't hungry), but this doesn't 100% prevent it.

- The best thing to do is to separate the culprit kitten (the one nursing on others) – you can let them play together with supervision, and eventually you'll probably be able to put them back together when they're older.

MEDICATION INSTRUCTIONS AND DOSES: QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

You need to discuss any medications given to your kittens with a vet. Most of what I list below isn't even available without a prescription from a vet. The vet will give you proper instructions and the correct dose to give. Do not use any of the medications below without guidance from a vet. This is a quick reference chart based on the Atlanta Humane Society's guidelines for the medications listed below.

Metronidazole (a.k.a. Metro)

- Treats giardia or can be used for diarrhea just to harden poop
- Dose: 0.1 mL per pound
- Typically given once a day for 5 days, but some vets give twice a day for 10 days
- Must be kept refrigerated

Tylosin

- Antibiotic for chronic diarrhea
- Dose: Mix a small pinch with formula or chicken broth and give 0.25 mL (however, dosage may vary, so consult a vet for the proper dose)
- Given twice a day for 4-5 days

Albon

- Treats bacterial infection or coccidia
- Dose: first dose only is 0.5 mL per pound; every other dose: 0.25 mL per pound
- Give once per day for 10-14 days
- Takes about a week to see any results

Marquis

- Treats coccidia
- Dose: 0.1 mL per pound
 - Note that this is different than the dose administered for prevention during routine care.
- Given once per day for 3 days
- Each day you also need to sanitize the kitten's environment and bathe the kitten being sure to scrub its feet and nails clean; otherwise, the kitten can continue to be re-infected with coccidia
- Get another fecal test done the day after you've completed the 3 days of medication to ensure that the kitten is now negative for coccidia

Doxycycline (a.k.a. Doxy)

- Antibiotic commonly used to treat upper respiratory infections among other things
- Typically comes as powder in capsules. You will have to open up the capsules and mix the powder with liquid (using the recipe measurements below) so that you can give it to kittens; These instructions are for capsules of doxy that are 100 mg – you'll need to adjust the recipe or consult your vet if you get capsules with more or less doxy)

# of 100 mg doxy capsules	Amount and type of liquid
1 capsule	5 mL of liquid (2.5 mL of Karo syrup + 2.5 mL of water)
2 capsules	10 mL of liquid (5 mL of Karo syrup + 5 mL of water)
3 capsules	15 mL of liquid (7.5 mL of Karo syrup + 7.5 mL of water)
4 capsules	20 mL of liquid (10 mL of Karo syrup + 10 mL of water)
5 capsules	25 mL of liquid (12.5 mL of Karo syrup + 12.5 mL of water)
6 capsules	30 mL of liquid (15 mL of Karo syrup + 15 mL of water)
7 capsules	35 mL of liquid (17.5 mL of Karo syrup + 17.5 mL of water)
8 capsules	40 mL of liquid (20 mL of Karo syrup + 20 mL of water)
9 capsules	45 mL of liquid (22.5 mL of Karo syrup + 22.5 mL of water)
10 capsules	50 mL of liquid (25 mL of Karo syrup + 25 mL of water)

- Dose: 0.2 mL per pound
- Given once a day for 10 days
- Make sure to shake it up each time you use it because the powder will naturally separate from the liquid

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Your job as a foster is to prepare the kitten for its future forever home. This not only includes keeping it healthy and alive, but you also want to teach this kitten behaviors that will help its future family love it.

- Cat routine: hunt, catch, kill, eat, groom, sleep
Cats are predators, and even though they are domestic house pets now, they still have natural predator instincts. It's usually very difficult or nearly impossible to completely stop these behaviors, so instead, you can encourage their natural instincts but in a way that's appropriate for a life indoors.

In the wild, a cat's natural routine is hunt, catch, kill, eat, groom, sleep. We can simulate this routine at home:

- **Hunt:** interactive play with a moving toy
 - Cats often entertain themselves playing with crinkle balls or stuffed mice toys, but they get more out of interactive play with you. At a

minimum, give your cat at least 10-15 minutes per day of interactive play where you are interacting with them.

- **Catch / Kill:** let the kitten catch the toy sometimes so that it feels the satisfaction of catching its prey and biting / kicking it to “kill” it
 - Some cats love to chase laser pointers, but also play with your cat using other toys that can be caught
 - **Eat:** reward your cat with a treat or a meal
 - **Groom:** encourage young kittens to groom themselves by brushing them with a toothbrush after mealtime; use short strokes to simulate how a mother cat would groom them
 - **Sleep:** Cats need a lot of sleep; let them rest
- Teach kittens not to bite human hands

As discussed above, it’s completely natural behavior for kittens to bite. Again, they are a predator species, and you’re not going to stop them from biting (hunting instinct). Instead, encourage them to bite on toys instead of humans.

For the first few weeks of an orphan kitten’s life, the only moving object it sees is your hand. When the kitten starts to develop its hunting instincts, it will try to hunt and bite on your hand. Redirect their attention to a toy instead.

Always encourage good behavior, but never discipline bad behavior. Cats don’t associate the discipline with the bad behavior you’re trying to stop. For example, if you use a water bottle to spray them as discipline for a bad behavior, they only associate the spray with the water bottle and become fearful of the bottle. They don’t learn to stop the bad behavior.

Don’t tempt kittens by wiggling your fingers at them and playing with them using your hands. That just teaches them that it’s fun to hunt human hands. It might be cute when a tiny kitten does it, but it’s not so cute when you have a full-grown cat that likes to bite your hands.

- Scratching and nail trimming

Kittens claws are an important part of their bodies. They use them for lots of things including scratching themselves, grooming, stretching, balance, and self-defense.

You should NEVER declaw a cat. The procedure doesn’t just remove the nail, it removes the entire first knuckle of the cat’s “finger” and is cruel mutilation. It results in pain and discomfort as well as emotional and behavioral problems.

Instead, teach them appropriate things they can scratch, and keep their nails trimmed. Start trimming kittens’ nails when they are 4 weeks old so that they get used to it early. When the kitten is very young, you can trim their tiny little claws with human nail clippers, but as soon as the claws are big enough for a cat nail

trimmer (available in most pet stores for a low cost), use this proper tool instead. Keep the mood calm while you trim. Only trim the white part of the nail – it is easy to see the pink part of a cat’s nail, and you never want to trim that part because it’s part of their flesh. Reward the kitten with treats after trimming!

If the kitten is scratching places it shouldn’t be, place scratching posts near where the kitten typically scratches – give them a better option than your couch. Some kittens prefer vertical scratching (like the leg of a chair), but others prefer horizontal scratching (like the arm of a chair). Get them scratching posts that match their scratching style. Also make sure the kitten is getting lots of enrichment and play time, and it won’t be as interested in scratching your furniture.

- “Floppy” kittens

Adopters love when you can hold a kitten on its back and it’s comfortable in any position. I call them “floppy” kittens. From a young age, make sure you’re handling the kitten frequently to get it used to human touch. Have friends come over and do the same so it gets used to lots of different humans picking it up and holding it on its back.

- Socializing kittens

I find that a lot of adopters want a social kitten – they don’t want a cat that runs and hides every time someone comes over. The best way to develop a social kitten is to give it plenty of exposure to different people while it is young. The kitten shouldn’t just be comfortable around you or you and your family; a social kitten is comfortable meeting new people.

- Cats and dogs

If you have a dog at home that is good around kittens, it’s a great opportunity to expose your foster kittens to dogs at a young age and hope that they don’t grow up to be afraid of them. Note that if you have a mother cat, it’s usually not a good idea to introduce the dog to the kittens with mama around – she will get very protective.