

Hand Rearing Kittens

Basic Functions of Life

Hand Rearing Kittens may be necessary if the mother is unable to feed and care for her kittens. This can be done by supplementary feeding until the mother is able to completely care for her kittens, or total replacement feeding. The main things to remember when feeding kittens are keeping your feeding and kitten area clean and hygienic, have a warm environment and taking the time to have a planned out feeding schedule. All the information regarding hand rearing kittens can be found below.

There are some problems which can be encountered whilst hand rearing such as dehydration and starvation due to the kittens not receiving enough milk and nutrients, and chilling which occurs when the kittens are kept in an environment that is too cold.

Keeping kittens warm is extremely important as they do not have the ability to regulate their own temperature and react to the cold by shivering. Warmth is usually gained from the mother's body heat – when this is not available kittens can be kept warm by lying them in contact with a warm, well-covered hot water bottle. Heat can be conserved by covering them with a blanket. Great care must be taken not to inflict contact burns by having the bottle too hot.

Acceptable alternatives are veterinary heating pads, and infra-red lamps with care to ensure the kittens are not too hot.

Orphaned kittens are very prone to infections so they must always be kept clean, and utensils used for preparing or administering the milk must be sterile. When not in use, nipples and syringes should be cleaned with mild soap and then placed into boiling water to sterilize.

Feeding Kittens

Kitten milk usually comes in powder form and is mixed with boiled water. We recommend Cimicat milk or Lactol Kitten milk. It is important to use kitten formula milk and not cows milk or cat milk as the kitten milk contains the necessary nutrients kittens need to survive and grow.

Where the kittens have been orphaned or the queen is unable to feed them, they will need total replacement feeding. The milk should be warmed to 35-37.8°C (95-100°F) before feeding and a drop of the kitten milk should be tested on the inside of the forearm to ensure it is the same temperature as your skin.

Kittens latch onto the nipple, creating a suction. A good suction will pull the syringe plunger down by itself and the ears will move independently. Sometimes when first starting to feed, a

kitten will not be able to create a suction on its own – then you must push the plunger down yourself. This must be done extremely delicately and a very small amount at a time. Smaller syringes allow better control for this. Pushing the plunger down too far can cause more harm than good and the kitten can choke on the milk. If you think this has happened, please call your vet for advice.

Fading Kittens

A 'Fading Kitten' is described as a newborn kitten failing to thrive and feed. Fading Kittens will move away from littermates, lose weight, and have a poor sucking reflex. Any number of reasons can be a cause for fading kittens; Infection during pregnancy, trouble during birthing, low birth weight, maternal neglect, malnutrition or genetics.

Fading Kittens sadly usually pass away before they can be weaned. "KittyStim" is a paste which can be bought from the practice and is used to stimulate small, underfed, and malnourished newborn kittens. It is rich in colostrum, glucose, and probiotics. This can be used to give the fading kitten an extra boost. Ensuring the kitten is kept in sanitary conditions, kept warm and fed very often will give the kitten its best chance.

After Feeding

After feeding, it is necessary to stimulate kittens to urinate and defecate by gently rubbing their genitals with a warm cotton pad to emulate the mother's tongue. When they reach 3-4 weeks old place them into a litter tray after urinating so that they get used to this routine. Leaving a small amount of soiled litter within the tray will serve as a reminder to the kittens of where to perform.

It is also important to gently pet the kitten and rub its tummy to release any built-up air or gas in the belly. Kittens may burp, just like human babies, once fed. Tummies should feel warm, round, and full. A healthy kitten has a round tummy. Petting afterwards emulates the mother cat cleaning her babies.

When to Feed

Newborn kittens should be fed every 3 hours, 2-week-old kittens can be fed every 4 hours, and 3-week-old kittens can be fed every 6 hours until they are weaned onto wet food. Kittens should be fed, toileted and then placed back into bed.

Newborn kittens take around 5ml per feed and this goes up by 10ml each week (2-week-old = 20ml per feed). Feeds should be every 3-4 hours until 3 weeks old, even through the night – this can then be reduced to every 5 hours until they are weaned onto solid food and water.

Monitoring Weight

It is advisable to monitor the kittens' growth rates by weighing them at least twice weekly. They should double their birth weight in the first 7-10 days, then continue to gain weight steadily. If weight is dropping, feed more often and if the weight continues to drop it is advisable to come in and see your vet.

Weaning

Weaning onto wet food consists of using mousse like food mixed with milk and gently smearing onto the kitten's face and paws. If the mother is present, they will most likely follow her lead, so it's important to move the food bowl and litter tray to where the kittens can see so that they can copy the mother cat. If the mother is not present, smearing the mousse onto the kittens' paws and face will allow them to lick off and get a taste for the food – this can take a few weeks and a lot of patience. Only when the kittens are confidently eating the soft mousse can the wet food be changed to have texture. Milk should be fed until the kittens are completely dependent on wet food and water.

Please phone us on 01324 829 989 if you have any questions or concerns and one of our team will be able to assist.