

## Basic Kitten Care

*This fact sheet explains the basics of caring for motherless neonatal kittens. For more in-depth information, please see The SF/SPCA Guide to Neonatal Kitten Care.*

### If You Find Kittens

First, determine whether they have a mother. Mother cats may be out for several hours at a time, so try to wait somewhere unobserved to see if she comes back.

If the kittens have a mother, you have several options:

- Take the mother and kittens into your home and confine them in a large cage or a small room such as a bathroom. This prevents the mother cat from moving the kittens and she will take care of raising them until they are old enough to be socialized and placed in homes. Once the kittens have been fully weaned, the mother can then be spayed and returned to her original habitat.
- Allow mom to care for her kittens where you found them. Unfortunately, she may move them at any time, so try to make the location as attractive and comfortable as possible. Give her a comfortable shelter and provide food and water every day. If you catch the kittens when they are weaned they can be socialized and placed in homes.
- Take the kittens from the mother, have her spayed, and raise the kittens yourself. This ensures that the mother will not move the kittens and they will be socialized to humans, but remember that in most cases it is best to keep kittens with their mother for the first few weeks of life.

If the kittens are indeed orphans, bring them into your home to establish their age, medical, and feeding needs. At this point, you must act quickly because neonatal kittens are fragile. Delay can be fatal.

Kittens should be alert and warm to the touch. **If the kittens are cold and listless, they must be warmed up immediately.** Chilling is the major cause of death of neonatal kittens, and can happen in just a few hours. Do not attempt to feed chilled kittens. Place the kittens in a box or pet carrier with a towel-covered heating pad set on low inside the box. Be sure the heating pad covers only half of the bottom of the box—the kittens must be able to move off the heating pad if it becomes too warm.

### Determining Age

- Under one week: Eyes shut, ears flat to head, skin looks pinkish. Part of umbilical cord may still be attached.
- 1 week-10 days: Eyes beginning to open, ears still flat. A kitten this age is smaller than your hand.
- 3 weeks: Eyes are fully open, ears are erect, teeth are visible. Kittens this age are just starting to walk and will be very wobbly.
- 4-5 weeks: Eyes have changed from blue to another color and/or kittens have begun to pounce and leap. Kittens this age will begin to eat regular cat food.

- 8 weeks: Kittens this age weigh approximately two pounds. If they have not been exposed to humans, they will likely be feral and unapproachable.

**The following instructions are for kittens approximately four weeks old and younger. If the kittens you find can already eat regular cat food, see The SF/SPCA fact sheet "Socializing Feral Kittens."**

### **Feeding**

Kittens cannot be fed until they are warmed—feeding chilled kittens is very dangerous. **Do not feed cow's milk**—it causes diarrhea which can lead to severe dehydration. You will need KMR or other kitten milk replacement formula, along with special bottles for feeding. The pre-mixed liquid formula is easier to use than the powdered form. These supplies are available at veterinary offices, pet supply stores, and in some cases, The SF/SPCA.

Depending on their age, kittens will need to be fed every two to six hours around the clock. To prepare the bottle, pierce a hole in the nipple with a pin or make a tiny slit with a razor. Make sure the hole is big enough for the milk to get through. Test the formula on your wrist—it should be slightly warm, **not hot, not cold**.

After they eat, kittens need help to urinate and defecate. To do this, moisten a cotton ball with warm water and gently rub the kitten's anal area. Waste will be mostly liquid at this point.

### **Health**

In addition to chilling, there are other conditions which must be treated without delay:

- Fleas can cause anemia in kittens and even death. If you notice fleas, you should flea comb the kitten as soon as possible. Do not use insecticides or any other flea products.
- Diarrhea and upper respiratory infection (similar to a human cold) are serious and should be immediately treated by a veterinarian.
- If a kitten cannot suck on the bottle, she may need to be fed with a veterinary feeding syringe (no needle). See The SF/SPCA Guide to Neonatal Kitten Care or bring the kitten to a veterinarian.

### **Weaning**

At about four weeks of age you can begin offering canned and dry kitten food. The kittens will begin using a litterbox as well.

### **San Francisco SPCA Resources**

- Fact sheets including "The Care and Feeding of Feral Cats," "Humane Trapping," and more.
- A Guide to Neonatal Kitten Care.
- Feral Cat Video Series, including *Neonatal Kitten Care*.
- Lifeline for Feral Cats (415) 554-3071. We can provide advice specific to your situation.
- The SF/SPCA Feral Fix Program provides free spay/neuter for San Francisco feral cats, no appointment necessary.