

Handrearing - a personal approach

These notes come from many years experience of handrearing kittens, many orphaned at birth. They are, however, only notes on my own methods other people may offer differing viewpoints. I make no apology for including the use of prescribed antibiotics as this is fully supported by my own vet who feels that the use of prophylactic antibiotics is generally unwise but that the benefits outweigh the drawbacks in neonatal kittens that appear to be failing

TOP TIP: *do not choose to handrear unless there are no other options. However caring, you cannot begin to provide the care provided by a feline mother. If at all possible, leave the babies with their mother and provide backup care. If handrearing is essential, you may also consider asking your breed club if they know of possible foster queens.*

FEEDING

Newborns, or kittens deprived of feed for some while can have problems feeding if initially offered milk substitute so initially give a small amount of Lectades (rehydration solution available from the vet) or a very little glucose in warm water, for the first feed. An hour later try a small amount of milk substitute

Never offer cows milk. Cats cannot digest the lactose content and this may lead to potentially fatal diarrhoea in tiny kittens. Ask your vet for Cimicat, Lactol or KMR which are all powdered, easy to prepare kitten milk substitutes. Do not be tempted to "add a bit extra to feed them up"! this usually only leads to tummy problems - the amounts are carefully calculated. In an emergency a little evaporated milk, well watered down, may be given.

Goats milk is another choice recommended by some but I have not personally found that kittens thrive on it.

HOW TO FEED



This is a much debated issue! The answer is that the best way to feed is the method with which you feel most comfortable as, if you are relaxed and calm, feeding will be far less stressful for you and the kittens and they will feed better

Tube feeding is a rapid way to fill an empty tummy but does carry risk and should only be carried out by the experienced as it is possible to over inflate the stomach, and not possible to determine if the milk is being digested.

Ask your vet to advise, and a vet nurse to demonstrate.

The easiest way to feed without risk of "flooding" (introducing fluid to the lungs which causes aspiration pneumonia and is often fatal) is to use a bottle and teat available from most pet shops. Do not make the holes too large as this will also cause flooding.

Personally I use a syringe.... the way I was taught and the only really feasible way to deal with a litter of 9, which was my introduction to handrearing! It is best to hold the syringe in the palm, for this method, not hold it as though you were using to inject. *(see image above)*. Practice with water onto your hand before trying this for the first time, and do not squeeze out more than a drop at a time. It is not necessary to depress the plunger once kittens are sucking properly – they draw down the milk simply by strength of suck (also good for jaw development as it mimics the exercise of suckling normally). Always check that the plunger of the syringe you are using, slides freely up and down the barrel; **discard any syringe which “sticks” when depressed** this could cause a flood of milk which the kitten may be unable to swallow!

TOP TIP: most kittens are highly sensitive to the temperature of feeds and many will refuse milk which is too cool. Test milk on the inside of the wrist as you would for a human baby feed... milk should feel warm but not hot. Keep a small bowl of very hot water by you, when feeding, so you can warm up the milk between kittens.

Initially the kittens will resist the unpleasant and unnatural feel of a bottle or syringe tip, in the mouth, and it is important not to rush things at this point. A few drops, repeated again after half an hour, and they will quickly get the hang of things and begin to really suck!

HOW MUCH SHOULD YOU FEED?

Follow the guidelines on the milk packets.

Do not make it up to extra strength to help them gain weight they will only become constipated!

Once they are sucking - let them take as much as they wish. Tiny kittens will not overfeed if they want more, its because they are still hungry

Newborns benefit greatly from feeding hourly for the first 24 hours

All new kittens need to be fed at least every 2 hours 24/7 and yes, this does mean almost no sleep for the first few days. However, once they are feeding well and have doubled their birth weight, this can be dropped to three hourly.

Do not rush let them take it at their pace

Top tip..... Hygiene is vital. The smallest bacteria are a potential killer for kittens with no immunity. Buy some sterilising tablets and use a plastic box or bowl to sterilise all feeding equipment. **WASH THE FLUID OFF THOROUGHLY WITH BOILED WATER BEFORE USE.** Don't forget to wash your hands **BEFORE** handling the kittens, as well as afterwards you are also a potential source of infection!



WEIGH YOUR KITTENS

Weighing tinies is the only way to know as quickly as possible that they may be running into trouble. Weight loss, or failure to gain weight, is the first indication that all may not be well with a tiny kitten, and it is not possible to detect 2 or 3 gram differences unless you weigh kittens. By the time you can "feel" that the baby has lost weight, its condition may already have become critical.

Weigh twice a day for newborns, daily after the first week if they are feeding well.

On average Siamese/Oriental kittens should gain a minimum 5 grams each day, more is preferable. Larger breeds should be expected to achieve higher weight gains, on a relative basis.

Note: Failure to gain, or slight loss, at one weighing is not a cause to panic... the kitten may have toileted since the last check. Try to weigh before feeding and before toileting, each time. If there has been a loss, weigh again after 6-8 hours.

TOILETING

Kittens are unable to urinate or pass faeces unaided in the beginning. It is important that, after each feed, the lower tummy and anal area are gently stimulated. Try to imitate the gentle pressure of a cats tongue and have lots of tissues to hand! Small well-fed kittens normally produce faeces once or twice a day. If they have not passed faeces for 24 hours, watch out for developing constipation



WARMTH

Tiny kittens are unable to maintain a regulated body temperature.

Keep them warm at all times - but not overly hot as this causes listlessness and poor feeding. Remember an average body temperature for a cat is around 101 degrees.

Be very careful if using hot water bottles if allowed to go cold, they actually leech heat away from the kittens. Make sure heat sources are well covered or a burrowing kitten may become burnt

Make sure the nest has a cooler area that the kittens can move to if they are feeling too hot.

WASH & BRUSH-UP!

Washing is a constant cat habit, and important for kittens for more than simply hygiene – although bottoms and faces must obviously be kept very clean.

The act stimulates kittens, improves circulation, and reinforces bonding - watch how often a mother cat noses and licks her babies!

Wash bottoms with damp cotton wool.

Elsewhere, use a barely damp piece of old flannel and gently wipe all over the coat – **never make the kitten wet**, cloths should be no damper than a cats tongue! Use paper towel to wipe again, removing any excess moisture. Finish with a gentle stroking with a piece of towelling or similar.

Top tip

Love your kittens! You are Mum .. purr, coo, stroke & play!

It pays dividends. In my experience, kittens that are simply fed and placed back in the nest do not thrive as well as kittens who are stroked and cuddled

PROBLEMS DO HAPPEN

Despite the best efforts, kittens sometimes begin to fail. This may be due to a hidden congenital fault, in which case there is little that can be done. However, in many cases the solution is more simple, and may be treatable. The difficulty is in diagnosis and the best of vets may be at a loss when faced with a tiny scrap of life whose only symptom is that it does not want to suck.

Look out for ...

- A kitten who is not gaining (or loses) weight!!
- A kitten who is less active
- A kitten who moves away from the pile of warm bodies, and sleeps alone in a cold corner



Take action sooner, not later

- has this kitten been toileting well? Could it be constipated?
Small kittens "go" frequently! Milk substitutes can often cause constipation and the condition can cause real health problems in tinies - ask your vet for Lactulose and advice on dosing
- does the kitten have sticky eyes with discharge and/or a runny nose
If the kitten is otherwise well, this may just be sticky eye and could respond to gentle bathing (cold tea is an old wives remedy which works - use on cotton wool and always wipe the eye from the inside corner to the outside, use a fresh piece of cotton wool for the other eye!)
However if the kitten also shows any of the signs listed in "what to look out for", or has blocked nostrils or difficulty breathing, then you should seek veterinary advice when the surgery is next open. Kittens do not "catch a cold"! These symptoms may indicate one of the serious feline viruses which are passed on from the mother and are often fatal in kittens left untreated. Antibiotics and/or eye ointment are needed. In the meantime, bathe the eyes gently to remove discharge.

If kittens show signs which concern you, consider seeking veterinary advice with a view to starting immediate treatment. Your action may be life-saving as tiny kittens can go from health to near death in a very short space of time.

The reasons may be unclear - even to your vet - and can include cord infections, systemic bacterial infections, inherited viral infections the list is long, hard to ascertain in such a tiny animal, and it is better to be safe than sorry. This viewpoint is fully supported by my own vet

TOP TIP: kittens with blocked noses cannot feed properly. You can help. Five minutes before feeding, put a spot (no larger than a matchhead) of Vicks Vapour Rub into a mug and half fill with boiling water.

Place on a flat surface and, **holding kitten securely in your hand**, cover mug and kitten with a towel so it breathes the vapours. Count to 5 then remove towel and **let the kitten breathe normal air for at least a minute**. Clear any mucous from nostrils, and the repeat for another count of 5. Leave the kitten to settle for 5 minutes, clear any further mucous from the nose and then feed. It should be able to suck much more effectively.

KEEPING RECORDS HELPS

It can be hard to remember which kitten fed well yesterday, or toileted, or gained how many grams, so keeping pen and paper next to the box and writing down these notes at each feed is a big help. The record quickly shows which kittens are doing well and which may be struggling and need more support. If it is difficult to distinguish between kittens – try marking claw tips with nail varnish (best done when they are sleeping!)

TLC CAN WORK MIRACLES!



These babies arrived at our home, at less than 2 days old. Very dehydrated, the smallest weighed just 48 grams

They required feeding every half hour, taking just a few drops as they were too weak to suck. After a long battle for life, (and days without sleep for us) they finally turned a corner.

Their weight gain was pitifully slow, and they suffered distended tummies for several weeks as they did not do well on milk substitutes.

Today they are contented healthy adults – living together – in a wonderful home with adoring owners

