



Feline Foster Care Manual

1640 Hanshaw Road

Ithaca, NY 14850

(607) 257-1822 (main number)

(607) 257-1874 (answered by staff during business hours)

(607) 592-6773 (after hours/emergency)

Medical Staff/Foster Contact:

(607)257-1822 ext. 240, catfoster@spcaonline.com

www.spcaonline.com

Welcome to the Feline Foster Program of the SPCA of Tompkins County!

Expectations

The goal of the SPCA of Tompkins County is to find homes for as many shelter animals as possible. Some animals require more specialized care before adoption than we can provide at the shelter. These include kittens who are too young for adoption, cats who require quiet spaces to recover from illness or injury, and kittens and cats who need intensive socialization. These pets benefit greatly from our foster parents' love and attention. We are grateful to each and every one of our foster parents for the vital role you play in providing the individual care required by some of our animals.

Foster parents will receive training and full support in order to make fostering the rewarding and wonderful experience it should be.

In 2019, we took in almost 1,200 cats, many of whom were kittens too young to be spayed or neutered upon intake.

Fostering kittens requires a significant time commitment. We ask that individuals interested in fostering kittens be available several weeks and sometime months at a time. We understand that you may have certain months or times of year that you are unavailable.

Types of fostering

Unweaned kittens ("neonates") need to be fed every two to four hours, including through the night, for the first several weeks of their lives. Caring for neonates is intensive and usually requires foster parents to have schedules that allow frequent breaks and time to care for the kittens.

Weaned kittens are able to eat on their own but are still fragile. They require gentle care and socialization.

Moms with nursing kittens, shy cats, cats with behavioral issues, and cats recovering from illness, injury or surgery require patient daily attention.

How do I get foster kittens?

Foster parents will be notified when kittens are in need of foster homes most often by email, or on occasion, by phone. When there is a need, one email is typically sent to all active foster parents at the same time. Please check your email regularly if you hope to take kittens, as they often get scooped up quickly. Since the goal is to get the kittens out of the shelter as soon as possible, kittens will often be sent with the person who responds first, or to the person that staff feels is the best fit for that particular kitten/litter.

Training

There are a number of different reasons why we seek foster care for our animals. During the spring, summer and fall months the majority of the cats placed into foster care are kittens and nursing mothers. We also seek foster care for injured and sick cats and kittens, and for cats who require extensive socialization before they can adjust to shelter life. Different skill sets are needed for each of these categories and some fostering experiences are quite different depending on individual circumstances.

For this reason, we train foster parents based upon their interests and provide foster parents with comprehensive instruction before sending you home with your new foster. Each year, we will also provide an orientation/review for new and current foster families, to review the basics and be available for questions. New foster parents will start with less challenging pets and slowly work up to more difficult cases as desired. Experienced foster parents will be asked to help with the more challenging pets (for example, very young neonates) until the newer members of our foster community are able to do so.

Training will:

- Address the environment in which cats and kittens should be kept.
- Provide a hands-on demonstration +/- instructional resources on how to feed and care for them.
- Provide information on what do to in the event of an emergency or should the foster pet(s) fall ill.
- Be as thorough as possible so that foster parents will leave with a complete understanding of how to care for their foster cats and kittens.

Home Visits

Home visits can be performed if requested by the foster family and are a great way to ensure your home is set up for success before taking cats/kittens. A volunteer or staff member will come to your home and provide information on-site about making your home cat or kitten friendly and safe. They will also go over the manual with you and be available to answer any questions.

Medical Appointments

All foster kittens (and their mothers) should be scheduled every two weeks for appointments with the medical staff at the shelter. They will be weighed, examined, and receive booster shots and dewormer.

- At four weeks, kittens will receive their first FVRCP vaccination, which should then be repeated every two weeks until they are four months old.
- Kittens should be dewormed regularly every two weeks.
- Flea treatments will be given at intake and provided thereafter as needed; please do not attempt to give kittens any flea medication.

Please see the staff contact info section to schedule your appointment with a member of the med staff. Most often, you will see Karen (shelter LVT), Ashley (shelter LVT), Kathy (shelter LVT), or one of our summer vet student employees.

Last updated 4/27/2020

Emergency Information

If one of your foster cats or kittens becomes seriously ill or injured, contact the shelter immediately.

During business hours (every day of the week and weekend, 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM), please call the shelter at **(607) 257-1874**. A member of the foster program or medical staff will assist you.

Outside of normal business hours, please call **our emergency number at (607) 592-6773**. **This is Tompkins County Animal Control**. This number will allow you to reach a member of the staff at all hours. Based on the information you provide, we will assess whether your foster cat or kitten can wait to be seen by a shelter veterinarian at the first opportunity or whether we need to seek emergency care at the Cornell Companion Animal Hospital. Please note that the Cornell Companion Animal Hospital is the only location where medical treatment outside of the shelter is permitted and **only with prior approval** by authorized SPCA staff. The shelter vet on call will be the one to make all of the decisions on the animals care in case of emergency. Foster parents are not allowed to authorize treatment.

If you are uncertain whether your foster cat or kitten is in danger or needs medical treatment **please do not hesitate to contact the shelter**. We welcome and encourage all calls and questions about the health and safety of foster pets.

Emotional Support

We are aware of the difficulties foster parents face when returning pets to the shelter for adoption. We are also aware of how fragile some cats and kittens are and how, despite your best efforts and excellent care, a foster pet may fail to thrive. We are committed to helping you with your foster experience and are glad to offer support should you need it. Providing foster care is a rewarding though sometimes difficult experience and we will provide as much emotional support as possible. Please reach out to other volunteers for support as well using the listserv and/or private volunteer facebook group.

Staff Contact Info

Karen Nieves, Ashley Workman, & Kathy Kirkland, Medical Staff/ Licensed Veterinary Technicians

(607) 257-1874 ext. 240

General Cat Foster E-mail: catfoster@spcaonline.com

Lynne Conway, Volunteer Programs Manager or Kat Pannill, Volunteer Coordinator

(607) 257-1874 ext. 247 or 246, lynne@spcaonline.com or kat@spcaonline.com

Adoption Staff

607-257-1822 ext. 221, adoptions@spcaonline.com

Important Notes and Procedures

The foster program of the SPCA of Tompkins County has evolved over the years. Even if you are a veteran foster parent with us, please review the notes below regarding current foster program policies. Any exceptions to the policies will be made by shelter staff.

1. Foster parents are limited to caring for one litter of kittens at a time. This is for the safety of the kittens to avoid contact with germs and diseases potentially carried by other litters. **If you offer foster services to other shelters, do not allow our kittens to mingle with any other cats.**
2. **All medical care and support must be sought through the shelter.** In the event of an emergency contact the shelter or the foster emergency line to speak with a member of our staff. Cats and kittens should be taken to the Cornell Companion Animal Hospital only with approval from an authorized member of the shelter staff's foster program.
3. **Do not give your foster cats or kittens any antibiotics or other medications unless they are prescribed by a shelter veterinarian or by a shelter LVT.**
4. Foster cats and kittens may not be moved between foster homes unless coordinated with foster program staff. If you need help fostering or have unexpected scheduling difficulties, please contact the shelter foster staff for assistance. We will relocate your cats or kittens as needed.
5. All foster parents must sign foster contracts for each pet in their care prior to taking them home.
6. Foster kittens must be brought back to the shelter **every two weeks** for medical checks and preventative vaccinations, including distemper boosters, deworming and other age appropriate care. Appointments will be made in advance and we will, as staffing time allows, provide appointment reminders. Foster parents who routinely miss appointments will be removed from the foster program.
7. Foster parents will receive a copy of the contract with the kittens' information on it. You may also record your own observations of the foster pet (shy, outgoing, dog-friendly, etc.) and add photos to their record if desired.
8. When the shelter requests that your foster pets be returned to the shelter, please do so within 24 hours. If this is not possible, please contact the foster coordinator.
9. When pets have completed foster, shelter staff will place the cats/kittens in the Pet Adoption Center or the Annex. **Under no circumstances should foster parents take pets directly to either facility or move pets between facilities.**
10. Spay/neuter surgeries for kittens are scheduled by medical staff at the appropriate time. After surgery, kittens are placed for adoption and are not returned to foster parents unless a specific medical need arises.
11. Please be on time for surgery. At the height of kitten season medical staff will schedule a large volume of spays/neuters in a single day. We prefer to have kittens return the day before, usually Tuesdays, before 6:30 PM. **If you need to bring them in the day of surgery (usually Wednesdays) you need to be here by 8:30 AM at the latest.**
12. When returning cats/kittens for surgery or appointments, **please check in at the Rescue Desk**, not the Pet Adoption Center. Never take pets directly to the surgical suite yourself.
13. If you have an interested adopter for one of your foster kittens, please direct the adopter to our website, where they can fill out a Cat Adoption Application. **They will need to include the specific kitten's animal reference number (ARN) on the application and email it to adoptions@spcaonline.com.** The ARN number (example: 23591-c) for each of your kittens can be found on the foster contract sent home with you when you pick up your kittens.

Time Line for the Care of Foster Cats and Kittens

Unweaned Kittens – no mother cat

- Enter foster care immediately
- Bottle-fed in foster care
- Medical check ups at shelter every 14 days
- Weaned in foster care
- Continue medical check ups at shelter every 14 days
- At roughly 8 weeks (2 pounds), spay/neuter surgery is scheduled
- After surgery, kittens are placed up for adoption by staff

Unweaned Kittens – with mother cat

- Enter foster care immediately
- Weaned by mother cat in 4-6 weeks
- Medical check ups at shelter every 14 days
- Mother cat returned to shelter for spaying and adoption
- Continue medical check ups for kittens at shelter every 14 days
- At roughly 8 weeks (2 pounds), spay/neuter surgery is scheduled
- After surgery, kittens are placed up for adoption by staff

Weaned Kittens

- Enter foster care after medical assessment
- Medical check ups at shelter every 14 days
- Remain in foster care until 8 weeks old or 2 pounds
- At roughly 8 weeks (2 pounds), spay/neuter surgery is scheduled
- After surgery, kittens are placed up for adoption by staff

Injured/Recovering Cats

- Enter foster care upon request of medical staff
- Regular communication between foster parents and medical staff
- Regular medical appointments, as needed/scheduled
- Return to shelter when requested by medical staff
- Placed for adoption pending final medical assessment.

Cats with Behavior Issues

- Enter foster upon request of cat coordinator
- Remain in foster with regular communication between foster parents and cat coordinator
- Return to shelter when requested by cat coordinator
- Place for adoption pending behavior evaluation

For Your Safety

Shelter animals may, on occasion, carry diseases or parasites that may be transmissible to humans. Our animals are medically assessed, treated and vaccinated against common elements (rabies, distemper, intestinal parasites, fleas, etc.) before they enter foster care. (Kittens under 12 weeks of age are too young to be vaccinated against rabies, and under 4 weeks are too young to be vaccinated against distemper) This eliminates some, if not all, of the risk posed to humans. However, it is still possible that shelter animals entering your home could potentially carry an illness that could affect your health or the health of your animals.

To reduce this risk, keep shelter pets apart from your own pets, particularly if they are recovering from an illness. Infections or illnesses carried by shelter pets are often common and highly treatable (like upper respiratory infections). Animals can remain contagious for sometime after being exposed to these infections. Keeping your pets separate from shelter pets, especially for the first two weeks in your home, will help keep your pets healthy.

We advise that those who have young (less than 1 year) or very old cats in the home, be up to date on vaccines (most importantly FVRCP and Rabies) and have a completely separate space for fosters. **We recommend that young cats have at least their first 1-year FVRCP (after the initial kitten series).** If you are unable to do this, we prefer that you wait to foster until that is the case.

Washing hands regularly after handling shelter animals is essential. Washing with plenty of soap and water for 30 seconds each time is the recommended method. Hand sanitizer is helpful but does not eliminate all viruses and bacteria. Limit exposure of foster pets to very young children. **After your foster pet has been returned to the shelter, be sure to carefully clean and disinfect the area(s) they have inhabited in your home before bringing in new foster cats or kittens.**

Concerns Regarding COVID-19 Pandemic

We are aware that cats can contract COVID from people and (in the laboratory setting after having been exposed to a very high dose of virus) cats can transmit it to other cats. There is no evidence currently that cats with COVID can, in turn, pass it on to another person. The CDC currently advises that any animal coming into the shelter from a home with known COVID infection be housed in the shelter with minimal contact for 14 days, out of an abundance of caution. **We would not send a kitten to foster care from a known COVID+ household without first housing it in the shelter for 14 days.**

Additionally, we would not intentionally send a kitten to a foster home that has an active COVID+ human. The recommendation from the CDC is that when an individual is diagnosed with COVID, they should be socially distanced from EVERYONE in their home INCLUDING their pets, out of an abundance of caution, for the safety of the pets. If a foster parent were to contract COVID-19, we would ask them to hold on to the kitten until they are well, unless they are unable to care for it. In that case, we would bring the kitten to the shelter to be housed for 14 days prior to seeking another foster home (or adoption if they are old enough).

Keeping owned pets separate from foster pets and ensuring proper handwashing before and after handling your fosters will be especially important during this time.

For answers to frequently asked questions regarding COVID & Animals, visit:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html#COVID-19-and-Animals>

Last updated 4/27/2020

Bite Holds

If you are bitten by your foster kitten, and the bite breaks the skin, **you must report the bite to the SPCA immediately!** We will require that the kitten come back to the shelter for an exam, and to stay for a MANDATORY Tompkins County Health Department 10 day bite quarantine. At that time, we will ask that you fill out a form to be submitted to the health department. Scratches, even if they break the skin, do not need to be reported, but you should immediately wash the area well with soap and water. It is the policy of the SPCA to not place kittens with suspicious bite wounds into foster care, except with rabies vaccinated staff/rabies vaccinated foster parents.

Policies/Expectations

The policies in this manual have been developed in coordination with the SPCA of Tompkins County and the Shelter Medicine Program at Cornell University, using both shelter and veterinarian expertise. Please adhere to the guidelines in this manual and follow our rules of conduct. We are unable to assign foster pets to individuals who do not comply with our guidelines.

Connect with Fellow Volunteers

Volunteers are encouraged to join the listserv and 'SPCA of Tompkins County Volunteers' Facebook Group. These groups are for ALL volunteers, not only foster families. They are a great place to seek advice and connect with others. You will also get adoption updates on previous fosters, shelter updates, and learn of events hosted by the shelter for volunteers, such as monthly tea time and potluck suppers (often include an educational component).

How to Join the Groups.io Listserv:

Point your browser to <https://groups.io/g/SPCA-of-TC-Volunteers>

Once you see the group, you will need to scroll down and click the blue button that says '+Apply For Membership In This Group.'

It will then ask for your email. You should receive an email from Groups.io that requires you to "Confirm account" and create a password. You will then need to wait for approval before you are able to participate.

Thank you!

We are grateful to our foster parents for your time and devotion to our shelter animals. Thank you for being willing to embrace the responsibility that goes with fostering pets.

Kitten Care

This part of the manual addresses kitten care. Please note that the manual is available on our website (www.spcaonline.com, under the Get Involved tab, under Become a Foster Family, Foster Resources). We will update the manual as often as needed, so please check our website often for the most recent manual. Kitten care is not an exact science and if you have any concerns or questions, please do not hesitate to contact the foster coordinator/medical staff at any time.

This manual contains three sections: neonatal kittens, weaning/weaned kittens, kittens with nursing mothers. **Please read all three sections.** It is important to remember whenever possible, mother cats should be kept with their kittens because they will always make better parents than we possibly can. Unfortunately the majority of kittens who come to the shelter have been orphaned and rely on foster care until they are ready for adoption.

Kittens must be isolated from any other animals in your household for the first fourteen days in your home. Kittens' immune systems are not fully developed until they are four months old making them much more susceptible to disease. This is also a safety measure for your own pets as shelter animals may carry communicable infections.

Please keep neonates completely isolated from any other household pets and handle them sparingly, only for feeding and stimulation. We prefer that weaned kittens do not mix with your resident pets. If you choose to do so, it is at your own risk, realizing that your pet could be exposed to parasites, fungal infections or viruses.

Ideally, all foster kittens/cats would be kept completely separate from your own pets.

Mothers with kittens will most likely object strongly to other animals, so please keep them completely isolated. See the foster protocol handbook for details about the risk of mixing your resident pets with shelter animals before choosing to do so.

Wash your hands thoroughly **before and after** you handle shelter animals to avoid exposing them to disease or infecting your resident pets.

Providing your Kittens with an Appropriate Home

Environmental Conditions

As a general rule, kittens must always be kept in an area that is quiet, secluded, and warm. The ambient temperature should be no less than 72° F. (Neonates have very specific needs, and the nests or dens in which they are housed should be significantly warmer, discussed in detail below.) It is acceptable to keep the kittens in their nesting box on the floor, but keep in mind that floor temperatures are often colder than the air temperature, and the heat will need to be raised accordingly. ***Never place nesting boxes over heating vents or ducts.***

Whatever room or area in which you choose to keep your kittens should be draft-free and relatively dry, with the humidity ideally between 55%-65%. Access to fresh air is essential, so the space should have adequate ventilation. Wherever you choose to keep them, it is important that kittens be housed in a practical space where you can get to them easily. Adequate lighting is crucial, and natural lighting is preferable.

It is best to keep kittens in an area with surfaces that can be easily cleaned, like a bathroom; tile and linoleum flooring are ideal. Should you foster kittens that become seriously ill, or have had an animal that has fallen ill or died recently in your home, please let us know so that we can assess the potentially infected area and suggest methods of cleaning that will eradicate any lingering pathogens.

Preparing a Space for Kittens

Preparing an area to receive kittens can be challenging. Neonates and very young kittens should be contained at all times within their rooms, and should only be taken out of their habitats under supervision for feeding, stimulation, and brief socialization. As they get older, the kittens will become increasingly mobile and will begin to explore their surroundings. Keep this in mind and store as little in your kitten space as possible to limit the possibility of them ingesting foreign objects or injuring themselves. When in doubt, remember: kittens will get into ***everything***.

Bathrooms make ideal kitten habitats, but toilets should be kept closed at ALL times to avoid fatal accidents. Areas should be free from any kind of string, electrical cords, blinds, rocking chairs, and toxic substances (like some houseplants). Should you have any questions about getting an area ready to receive kittens, contact the shelter. We will be happy to talk you through any concerns you may have. If you have concerns or questions after your initial home visit, we can visit again to help you identify potential hazards.

A House is a Home

Once the designated area is prepared, kittens need to have a space where they can be contained within their room. Large dog crates can work very well for this purpose; sometimes it is necessary to tape off or pad gaps along the bottom. Providing a nesting box or den is essential so that kittens will have a home base. Ideally, nesting boxes should be made of plastic, so that they can be disinfected between litters of kittens. These boxes should be thoroughly lined with towels and blankets, which the shelter will provide.

For foster parents caring for neonates, we will provide a large plastic bin with a mesh lid, which is an adequate environment for very young bottle-feeders. As the kittens grow and become more mobile, a larger nesting box with lower sides will suffice. Kittens can go in and out of the new nesting box to access food, water, and

litter boxes. Mothers with kittens should have a den large enough to accommodate her and her kittens with enough space that she can stretch out to nurse them.

Kittens will soil their bedding or it will become damp with humidity. Soiled bedding should be removed and laundered and replaced with fresh bedding regularly. It is very important that the kittens are not left in damp or wet bedding as it may cause the kittens to chill. Try to leave at least one blanket or towel within their den that remains covered in their scent; this is particularly important when the kittens are very young, as they rely almost entirely on their sense of smell. The scents they leave on their bedding provide them with a source of comfort, decreasing stress.

Section One: Caring for Neonatal Kittens

Particular Environmental Concerns for Neonatal Kittens

Neonatal kittens should be kept in an enclosed den at all times, which is covered with a mesh lid. We will provide all foster parents with a 'snuggle safe' disc, which, when heated in the microwave will retain heat for up to eight to ten hours, and may be reheated as often as necessary (please do *not* heat the discs beyond the maximum recommendation, they can and will explode). As discs age, they become less and less heat efficient, so make sure to check often at the beginning, to ensure your disc is providing ample warmth.

These are general guidelines for heating 'SnuggleSafe' discs; please be aware that these are not exact times, depending on the microwave and the age of the disc, so use caution when heating the discs, and test them often:

Once warm, wrap the disc (which should be hot to the touch) in a towel, and place it under a section of the kitten's blankets. ***It is essential that there be ample room, so that the kittens can move away from the heat source, if they become too warm.***

Below, find recommendations for den temperatures, according to the age of the kittens. In order to maintain a constant temperature, cover the dens with a towel or blanket. Make sure to check the temperature frequently as it is essential that the kittens neither chill nor overheat.

Microwave Power	Time
600-650 watts	8 minutes
700-750 watts	7 minutes
800-850 watts	6 minutes
900-1000 watts	5 minutes
1100-1200 watts	4 minutes
1300-1400 watts	2 ½ minutes

Age (days)	Nest Box Temperature	Normal Body Temperature
0-7	85° F	96-98° F
8-28	80° F	99° F
29-35	75° F	100° F

Single neonatal kittens are most vulnerable to chill. They have no body fat, and therefore have no mechanism to regulate their own temperature. Litters have the advantage of sleeping next to one another, more efficiently retaining body heat. Kittens with nursing mothers are less prone to chill, because they can derive warmth from their mother.

Feeding

Milk Replacement

The shelter will provide a form of kitten milk replacement (often KMR), which comes in powder form which, when mixed with water, provides neonates with ample nutrition. Follow the instructions provided on the container to properly reconstitute the powder and store it in a glass jar in the refrigerator. Most milk replacement will last only 24 hours. Please mix only as much as you will use within that time period to avoid waste.

It is very important to mix kitten milk replacement properly! Over-concentrated milk replacement can give kittens diarrhea and under-concentrated milk replacement will not provide ample nutrition. Only the first few feedings of formula should be purposefully diluted, in order to get the kittens' systems used to feeding.

Below is an emergency recipe for milk replacement, should you find yourself without formula when the shelter is closed. Please note: this ***should not happen***. The shelter is open every day, 8am-5pm, so should you being to run low on milk replacement, ***please come to the shelter to get more before your run out completely***. Note also, recipes for emergency replacement are not used without risks, as most contain raw egg, which has the potential to transmit serious bacterial infections to kittens.

90 ml (3 ounces) condensed milk
90 ml (3 ounces) water
120 ml (4 ounces) plain yogurt (not low fat)
3 large or 4 small egg yolks

Feeding Materials

As stated above, carefully mix all milk replacement in appropriate proportion in a lidded, glass jar, which you can then shake vigorously to mix. Foster parents will be provided with bottle sets containing several bottles, funnels, bottle-cleaning brushes, and pre-cut nipples. The nipples have each had small openings made with a hot needle, which should allow a small amount of milk to slowly pass through. Please do not cut large holes; if the openings are too big, kittens can swallow too much formula at once and aspirate.

Keep all feeding materials clean. Wash everything thoroughly with soap and hot water (or in a dishwasher) and store materials in a clean area. When the formula dries, it can become crusted to the inside of the bottles, so we have provided bottle-cleaning brushes small enough to fit inside. ***It is particularly important that feeding materials be very well cleaned if they are being used between litters.***

Feeding

Because kittens can be quite difficult to hold still, it can be helpful to swaddle them in a hand towel while you feed.

- Warm KMR to roughly 100°F (maternal body temperature is 101.5°F).
- Hold the kitten gently, lying with its stomach pressed against your hand, so that its feet can push off against you (think of the position in which it would naturally nurse from its mother).
- Hold the nipple at a very slight angle, mimicking the angle at which a nursing kitten would lift its head to suckle. If the kitten does not automatically receive the nipple, gently open its mouth with your fingers; sometimes moving the nipple in and around its mouth will encourage the kitten to latch on.
- The kitten will stop eating when it is full, but generally should take in 0.7 fluid ounces (4 teaspoons) for each pound it weights at each feeding.
- ***Never squeeze the bottle***; let the kitten eat at its own pace.
- Avoid overfeeding, which can lead to diarrhea, vomiting, or aspiration.
- Should kittens refuse to take formula from the bottle, try gently rubbing their heads and faces. Sometimes kittens won't eat if they need to go to the bathroom, so try stimulating to pee or poop. Make sure they are warm enough. Kittens can easily become dehydrated and hypoglycemic; should they repeatedly refuse to feed, contact the shelter immediately. A shelter

staff member may be able to tube feed the kitten until they start eating again on their own. Force feeding neonates can cause aspiration, so please call us if they aren't eating on their own.

- Feeding frequency is dependent upon the age of the neonate, the volume consumed at each feeding, and the food quality.
 - Newborns should be fed 6 to 8 times daily (roughly every two to three hours)
 - Once they are two to three weeks old, kittens can go up to four hours between feedings.

Stimulation

For roughly the first three weeks, kittens must be stimulated to urinate and defecate. Using a washcloth soaked in warm water and rung out thoroughly, gently rub the lower abdomen, genitals, and rectum. Kittens will probably urinate each time they are stimulated, but may not defecate for up to 2-3 days. They may also defecate a few minutes after stimulation, so be sure to check and clean them if this occurs. Sometimes gently inserting a lubricated rectal thermometer can also help stimulate defecation.

Kitten suckling

All kittens have the natural instinct to want to nurse/suckle. Commonly, especially with orphaned bottle fed kittens, they will look to each other to nurse. If you notice that your foster kittens are trying to nurse on each other, they must be immediately separated! If kittens are allowed to nurse on each other (especially the genitalia) it can cause severe damage. If allowed to continue, it could result in life threatening damage. Please separate the kittens and call the shelter for additional advice.

Section Two: Caring for Weaning/Weaned Kittens

Weaning

At roughly four weeks, kittens will begin to wean. Do not be surprised if their first introduction to solid food results in either diarrhea or constipation; this is merely the result of introducing new elements to their digestive systems. This should be expected to clear up within a few days. It is crucial during weaning to offer kittens ample fresh water in order to keep them well hydrated.

Some kittens will take directly to dry or wet food; others will need more coaxing. For those resistant to trying solid food, offer a teaspoon of A/D mixed with hydrated milk replacement (or a pre-mixed milk solution, available at the shelter); the resulting slurry often helps to tempt reticent kittens to begin eating. (Please note that A/D is very rich, and should be used sparingly, as it can often give kittens diarrhea.) Wet food that is warmed in the microwave for a few seconds can also be more appetizing to kittens, as it becomes fragrant when heated. During the weaning process, continue supplemental bottle feeding as necessary.

Once kittens are fully weaned, offer them dry kitten food and water at all times; supplement this with wet food at least twice per day.

Litter training

At roughly three weeks, the kittens will be ready to begin litter training. Provide the kittens with a low-sided litter box, and after each feeding, place them in the box. It may take up to a week or two for them to begin using the box independently and regularly. We recommend covering the surrounding area under the litter box with newspaper, to make accidents easier to clean up.

Should your kittens continually eliminate outside their box, try the following:

- If they constantly go in one area, clean it very thoroughly to eliminate any lingering smell that might attract them, or place a litter box over the area
- Provide them with multiple litter boxes
- Try changing the kind of litter you use to pellets, clay, or wheat-based
- Confine them to a smaller area if they currently have access to a larger room.

If the problem persists, contact the shelter, and we will try to help you problem-solve.

Health

Weight gain: kittens should gain an average of 4oz. per week, and should be weighed regularly. Weight loss in kittens is very serious and should be brought to the attention of the shelter staff immediately. You can purchase a small, accurate kitchen scale for very little expense.

Cleanliness: When a mother is present, she will keep her kittens clean and well-groomed; in the absence of a mother, it falls upon the foster parent to keep their kittens unsullied. Inevitably, kittens will get food and feces stuck in their fur – gently wash off any filth with a warm, damp washcloth.

NEVER submerge your kittens in water, and try not to get them too wet during the cleaning process, as

they chill quickly. Once they are clean, wrap them in a warm towel and hold them until they are quite dry. Place them back in their nesting box, or in another warm, dry area; warm the box with the heating disc.

Hydration: Kittens should always be well hydrated. Check their hydration daily by ensuring their gums are nice and moist, and by gently pinching the skin on their necks or backs; their skin should snap back quickly. If it remains in a pinched position, they are probably under hydrated, and should receive fluids promptly.

Stool:

- When kittens are newborn, their feces should be bright yellow and quite liquid in consistency.
- As they are introduced to solid food, some diarrhea or constipation often results, as discussed above. If you are concerned, please contact the shelter, and you may be asked to bring in a fecal sample and/or the kitten.
- If the kitten(s) experiences severe diarrhea while the shelter is closed, we may have provided Albon in your kitten kit. This is an anti-parasitic that also has anti-inflammatory properties. Albon may be used to treat diarrhea until the kittens can be brought in for evaluation, fluids, and/or supportive care. It can be given daily per the dosage provided on the label.
- We have also provided a few packets of Fortiflora in your kits. In the event of diarrhea, a pinch can be added to each feeding of food or formula in order to help re-establish the natural gut flora.

Urine: Urine should always be yellow, and kittens should not strain when urinating. If kittens appear to be straining, or if their urine is any other color than yellow – particularly if it appears to contain blood – contact the shelter immediately.

General Health: Should you notice the following symptoms, please monitor the kittens closely, and, should they persist, contact shelter medical staff:

- Sneezing, coughing, discharge from eyes or nose;
- Wheezing;
- Change in behavior or lethargy; loss or decrease of appetite;
- Bleeding from any part of the body;
- Straining to urinate or defecate;
- Diarrhea;
- Abnormal body movement like twitching or spasms;
- Heavy breathing.
- Not eating

Sometimes, kittens will either crawl or fall out of the nesting box, and become chilled. Depending how long they are exposed, they may be very inactive and lethargic when you find them. Hold them closely to your chest, and warm them slowly. Heat the SnuggleSafe, and warm the kittens in blankets with the heating disc. As the kitten begins to warm up, you can take a pea-sized amount of Nutri-cal or Karo Syrup, and rub it gently onto the roof of the kitten's mouth or gums. Contact the shelter for emergency instruction.

Important benchmarks:

When kittens are **neonates** (one to four weeks old), they are very fragile and highly susceptible to physiologic stress and disease; at this age there is a very high mortality rate. It is also during the neonatal stage that kittens undergo several exciting developments: at five days, kittens will begin to hear; they will open their eyes between seven to twelve days; and should begin to crawl at three weeks.

Weanlings (four to five weeks old) are, as discussed above, transitioning. During this time they begin to eat, urinate, and defecate on their own. They will become more proficient at walking, and will begin to explore their environment.

Between four and eight weeks of age, they will begin to act like true **kittens**. They will be highly explorative, mobile, and capable of wreaking havoc. It is in this stage that kittens should be actively socialized. Make sure to provide them with toys and stimulation.

Section Three: Caring for Nursing Mothers

The wonderful thing about fostering a mother with her kittens is that one's role as a foster parent is greatly simplified. If her kittens are very young, she will provide all their nutrition, stimulate them to use the bathroom, take care of the waste, and groom them; when they are ready, she will also teach her kittens to use the litter box (however, it may still be necessary for you to supplement her instruction, by placing kittens in the litter box should you notice they have a tendency to urinate or defecate elsewhere). At the beginning, the foster parent's role is simply to monitor, provide warm and quiet housing, and to feed and care for the mother.

Nursing mothers and their kittens should be separated from all other pets in the household. Mothers are often highly protective of their kittens, and should not be stressed. Ensure their nesting box is spacious, but provide mother cats with an area apart from the kittens. A mother cat should be present to feed, groom, and keep her kittens warm; monitor to ensure she is with them most of the time. If she spends more than two consecutive hours away from the kittens, there may be a problem. In such cases, contact the shelter, as we may advise you to provide supplemental feeding and warmth.

Nursing mothers require significantly more calories in their diet than a normal, adult cat: **they should be provided with dry kitten food and water at all times, and their diet should be supplemented with wet food regularly (ideally twice per day)**. Watching her eat may encourage kittens to wean more quickly than they might if bottle fed, so watch to see when they begin trying to eat solid food (as early as three to four weeks).

Please keep in mind that nursing mothers will be vaccinated and treated for fleas and worms before they enter foster care. They will need to be brought in every two weeks, with their kittens, for FVRCP booster shots, continued deworming, and to have their mammary glands and milk production monitored.