



FELINE FOSTER CARE GUIDE



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Preparing for your Cat and/or Kittens:

Your foster cats and/or kittens should be separated from all other animals in your household and kept in a small area, such as a spare room or bathroom, where they have access to their food, water and litter box. Because kittens cannot regulate their body temperature, this area should also be in a warm, draft-free area. It may be a good idea to consider an area that is easy to clean up in terms of spills and litter box accidents. Please do not put cats or kittens in a garage or place that has outdoor access; those locations are not safe.

Supplies you'll need

The Wild Rose Humane Society will provide you with any supplies that you may need. However, we greatly appreciate any help that you can provide in supplying items for your foster kittens. Here's what you'll need to care for your foster kittens:

- At least one bowl for dry food and one for water: If you have a large litter, you will need to provide more than one bowl each.
- Kitten food
- Litter box with low sides: More than one may be needed for larger litters.
- Non-clumping litter
- Heat source: Heating pads work great (This is optional).
- A soft place to sleep: Old towels or blankets work well.
- A secure sleeping area to keep mom and kittens in one place. A child's pool which can be provided also works well to contain mom and babies.
- Toys: Use kitten-safe toys that are easy to sanitize and clean. Kittens can play with them when you're not home.
- Scratching post. (This is optional).

Preparing for Mom and Kittens

Mother cats need to be in a calm environment so that they can be stress-free and feel like they are keeping their kittens safe. Sometimes, stress can cause a mother cat to become aggressive or to not care for her babies properly. With that in mind, choose a private and quiet room of your home, away from the daily activities of your family, in which to situate the mother cat and her kittens.

It's also important that they be kept away from other pets in the home. Other pets can be perceived as a threat by the mother cat and cause her to act aggressively to protect her young. If you have children and an active home, it may be best to foster when the kittens are four weeks or older. Sometimes mother cats will behave less defensively if their kittens are older.

Pregnancy, Labour & Birth

During her last week of pregnancy, a mother cat may not have a big appetite because the kittens are crowding her organs. Feed her several small meals daily rather than one or two larger meals. Leave dry cat food and water out at all times. If the mother cat will not eat the food provided, try mixing it with a small amount of tuna or other fish flavored cat food.

Prepare a nesting box (a child's pool works well for a nesting box); place it in a dry, warm, relatively dark, draft-free and out of the way place. Place the mother cat in the box. If she does not want to stay, do not insist, but encourage her by petting her and giving her little food treats.

If your nursery room is not warm enough, wrap a heating pad in a towel, set it on the lowest setting and place it under the box so the mother has room to move away from the heat source if she chooses. You may consider wrapping duct tape around the cord; otherwise the kittens will be apt to chew on it.

Labour

Before the delivery, the mother cat may become very irritable and restless. She will search for a place to have her kittens. Try to place her in the designated nesting box. She may choose another location to give birth, so it may be helpful to place the box in a room without any hiding places. Let her have the kittens outside of her next box if she chooses. When delivery is complete, you may then move the mother and the kittens into the box.

Some cats may want you to stay with them and will follow you if you leave. You will probably have to spend some time soothing this kind of cat. Often after the birth of the first couple of kittens, she will be very busy and not as dependent on your presence. Other cats will try to get away and hide when in labour. Give this kind of cat the space she needs to feel comfortable, but check up on her regularly.

Three Stages of Feline Labour

- Stage 1: The first stage may take 12 hours, during which the mother may purr or breathe rhythmically. She may become very active, dig at the floor, cry loudly and appear to be straining to use her litter box.
- Stage 2: In the second stage, the water bag breaks and straw like fluid is passed. Delivery will begin a few minutes later. The mother cat will lick the newborn kitten clean and bite through the umbilical cord. She is bonding with her kittens through this process and learning to recognize them as her own. It is very important that you do not disturb her. It may appear as though she is too rough, but she is actually stimulating breathing and increasing blood circulation.
- Stage 3: In the final stage, the placenta follows a few minutes after delivery of a kitten. The mother will probably eat some or all of the placentas.

Birth

Kittens are born anywhere from 15-30 minutes apart; so most deliveries take 2-6 hours. The average litter is 4 to 5 kittens. The mother cat is probably finished giving birth if she seems calm and happy, although there have been some cases in which a cat resumed delivery sometime later. If a kitten is not born within 2 hours and the mother is continually straining or in distress you should seek emergency veterinary care as soon as possible.

Please let the foster coordinator know when your mother cat has given birth.

Mom's care of her kittens

The momma cat should take care of her kittens by herself for at least three to four weeks before she starts the weaning process for her babies. Each momma cat that you foster will be slightly different in her level of attentiveness. If you have any questions or concerns please notify the foster coordinator to evaluate whether the mom has a medical concern that we need to address.

The mother cat will groom and lick her babies frequently for the first two to four weeks. She will stimulate her kittens to pee and poop, and will generally consume the fecal matter and urine. As the babies become more mobile, they will start to leave the nest and deposit urine and feces nearby, which is a good time to start introducing a couple of low-sided litter boxes.

To ensure that the mother cat has enough to eat, give her access to both wet and dry food at all times. Food intake for a nursing mother can be two to four times the amount eaten by a cat who's not nursing.

When fostering a momma cat, it is very important to observe her behavior daily and watch her interactions with her kittens to spot any problems. Unfortunately, 8 percent of kittens pass away because of inadequate maternal care. This can happen for many different reasons, some of which are beyond our control.

The First 8 Weeks of Life

Week 1

- A nursing mother cat cannot be overfed. Food requirements can increase up to three times the normal amount. Leave food out for the mother cat at ALL times;
- The kitten's ear canals open between 5 and 8 days old;
- Kittens will sleep 90% of the time and nurse from their mother the other 10%. They should nurse vigorously and littermates should compete for nipples;
- Kittens can nurse for up to 45 minutes at a time;
- Chilling is the number one danger to newborn kittens;
- Try to watch kittens nurse at least once a day. Make sure every kitten is nursing and there is not too much maneuvering for position. A great deal of activity and crying could indicate a problem with milk flow or quality. When the mother cat re-enters the nest box, there should be fussing for only a few minutes before the kittens settle down.

Week 2

- The kitten's eyes will open between 8 and 14 days. They open gradually, usually starting from the nose outward. Short haired cats' eyes usually open earlier than those with longer hair;
- All newborn kittens have blue eyes and initially no pupils can be distinguished. The eyes appear a solid, dark blue.

Week 3

- The mother cat will begin to spend more time out of the nest;
- The kittens' ears will begin to stand erect;
- The kittens should now be spending only 60-70% of their time sleeping;
- Kittens generally begin to crawl around day 18 and can usually stand by day 21;
- The kitten's milk teeth will begin to cut;
- Kittens will begin to play with each other, learn to sit and will start trying to touch objects with their paws;
- During week 3, kittens should begin their socialization phase. Start to increase the amount of handling the kittens receive and try to accustom them to human contact. Avoid exposing them to anything frightening.

Week 4

- Adult eye colour will begin to appear, although it may not be final for another 9 – 12 weeks. The kittens will begin to develop complete sound and sight orientation.
- Kittens will begin to clean themselves, although their mother will continue to do most of the serious cleaning;
- Kittens can begin to eat from a shallow saucer and should be weaned gradually from their mother's milk. The mother cat will usually begin to discourage her kittens from nursing; however, some cats (particularly those with smaller litters) will allow nursing until the kittens are around two months old; ***(please see weaning notes below)***.
- Sometimes nursing activity is done just for comfort. Even if the kittens appear to be nursing, they may not be receiving all the nutrition they need. Make sure they are eating and gaining weight;

- It is also at this time that kittens will begin to eliminate on their own. Supply a small, low litter box and fill it with clay litter. Do NOT use the clumping variety: it is hard to clean and it is harmful if ingested.

Week 5

- The male kittens' testicles will become visible;
- The kittens should be very active and be able to get out of the nest;
- Weaning and litter box training should continue.

Week 6

- The kittens should have complete visual abilities. They will imitate their mother, use scratching posts, and explore the world around them;
- Begin to introduce solid food (*please see weaning notes below*).

Week 7

- Nursing sessions should be brief and infrequent, if they take place at all;
- The kittens should now eat undiluted kitten food. Continue to encourage the kittens to eat dry food. Dry food is good for their teeth and will likely be what they are fed in their adoptive homes.

Week 8

- By the end of week 8 the kittens should weigh 2 pounds. They should be sociable and ready to come into the shelter.

Problem behaviors in momma cats

Maternal neglect. Sometimes a mother cat stops providing care to one or all of her kittens. The neglect may be because of a birth defect or weakness in the kitten; she may just be trying to follow nature's course, focusing her attention on the stronger kittens. Neglect may also happen because she is inexperienced or she's in a stressful environment. If you notice that she is spending all of her time away from the kittens, is not grooming or nursing them frequently, or doesn't respond to their cries, please call the foster coordinator right away.

Maternal aggression toward other animals. Aggressive behavior directed at other animals is common and expected from mother cats because they have a maternal instinct to protect their young at all times. With that in mind, please do not try to introduce her to the other animals in your home. As mentioned above, the mom cat and her kittens should

have a quiet room of their own away from all other pets so that she and her babies can always feel safe. If she has seen another animal and becomes stressed or aggressive, it is very important to leave her alone and not try to comfort her. Give her 20 minutes or so to calm down and then check on her.

Maternal aggression toward people. Sometimes mother cats will act aggressively toward people. These behaviors may include hissing, growling, swatting and biting. Again, the mother is merely trying to protect her young. We evaluate mom cats for these behaviors before sending them into foster homes, but sometimes the behaviors develop later. If you have a mother exhibiting these behaviors, do not try to “correct” the behavior with a spray bottle or any type of punishment. She is only acting out of instinct to protect her babies and you could cause her aggressive behavior to escalate

Contact the foster coordinator at the first sign of any of the above behaviors so we can assess the situation and decide on the safest option for momma and her babies.

Separating kittens and moms

If all of your foster animals, mom included, are healthy and friendly, we have no reason to separate mom from kittens before they are eight weeks old. But there are a few medical or behavioral reasons for separating them earlier than eight weeks:

- If the mother cat is showing signs of maternal neglect and is no longer caring for her kittens, the foster coordinator may decide to separate her from her kittens.
- If the mother cat is semi-feral or very under socialized, we may decide to separate the kittens once they are eating on their own consistently and no longer need to nurse (around four to five weeks old). Separating them would prevent the kittens from learning feral behaviors from their mother and help them to become socialized, which increases their chances of finding forever homes.
- If there is a medical concern about the mom or babies, a veterinarian could make the decision to separate the kittens from the mother cat.

The kittens’ best chance at survival is to stay with their mom. Please do not separate your foster kittens from their mom for any reason, or attempt to supplement the mother’s milk with formula, without consulting the foster coordinator.

Establishing good litter box habits

Start introducing your kittens to the litter box around the age of four to five weeks. Make sure the litter box you are using has low sides, to make it easy for the kittens to climb in and out. Keep kittens confined to a small area and have at least one litter box in each room that the kittens can access. You can encourage the kittens to use the litter box by gently returning them to their box every 15–20 minutes while they're playing.

You also want to make sure that you are scooping the litter box at least twice a day, more if you have a large litter or they have diarrhea. You will also need to dump the litter box entirely every two to three days and clean with dish soap. A clean litter box will promote good bathroom habits for the kittens going forward.

With kittens younger than eight weeks, though, use **only non-clumping litter**. The reason for this is that very young kittens tend to taste their litter and play in it. If you use clumping litter, the dust from the litter can solidify in their respiratory or digestive tracts.

Shy cats and kittens

Schedule for successful socialization

If your foster kittens or a new foster cat are on the shy side when you bring them home, you'll need to have a more focused socialization plan.

For kittens:

Days 1–7: Your foster kittens may be hissing, swatting, spitting and/or growling. Activities to engage in:

- “Burrito-wrapping” the kitten in a blanket or towel: Use gloves and a towel to handle the kitten if needed.
- Hand-feeding: Feed the kittens dabs of baby food or canned tuna.
- Picking up and returning: Repeatedly pick up each kitten and return him/her to their safe space.
- Playing: Try engaging the kittens in play with interactive toys.

Days 7–14: The kittens may hiss when you approach, but respond to touching and petting. Activities to engage in:

- Handling: Continue handling and petting the kittens, but do not go too fast.
- More playing: Start standing and walking around while playing with the kittens, to get them used to normal human movement.
- More hand-feeding: Give the kittens treats while you handle them, to help them learn that you are not a threat.

After 14 days: Your kittens may still be shy, but should be more comfortable with you approaching them and should no longer display defensive aggression behaviors. If your kittens do not show improvement at all after two weeks of attempts at socialization, please contact the foster department for guidance.

For cats:

Cats often need time to acclimate to their new surroundings. When bringing a new shy cat home, it is important to remember that she is going to need time and assistance to feel comfortable in her new environment.

Provide a small, quiet place for your cat to get acclimated, such as a spare bedroom or bathroom. Ideally the room will be equipped with windows for natural light. This will allow your cat to express natural behavior while in the room.

Make sure your cat has access to water and a litter box at all times.

Scatter some enticing kitty toys throughout the room, such as a catnip mouse and a ball to bat around.

Offer your new cat a cozy place to hide. This could be a hut-type cat bed purchased from a pet store, a cardboard box with an opening cut in the side and bedding placed inside (keep the top flaps closed but don't seal them), or a plastic shelving unit with bedding on one of the higher shelves and a towel or blanket draped over the front. Use what works for your home.

Put your cat's hiding place somewhere that is easily accessible by you and your cat, but that is mostly out of view.

Block off potential hiding spots that are inaccessible to you. Cats often feel safer when elevated; be cautious of loft rafters or attic access doors in closets.

Monitor your new cat's appetite by measuring out the dry food you provide for her. For the first few weeks, monitoring is important to let you know how much your cat is eating daily, or if she isn't eating. Not eating for more than two days can be dangerous for a cat so you do need to see right away what her food consumption is.

If your cat is very fearful, offer her canned food several times a day and remain in the room while she eats. This will help create a bond and help your cat learn to trust you. In the beginning, spoon feeding your cat in her hiding place may be the best option. If she won't eat from the spoon, place the food as close as you can to the cat and simply sit at the farthest point in the room. Warming the food a bit could stimulate the appetite in a cat who otherwise isn't eating in your presence. As she becomes more comfortable, you can move a little closer and hand feed her, then transition to giving the food on a plate and luring her out of hiding to eat.

Invite your cat to play. You might be surprised how many shut down, fearful cats spring to life when invited to play. Interactive toys are a great way to bond with your new cat and help her feel more comfortable. Wand toys are the obvious choice. Wiggle the toy back and forth across the floor or base of your cat's hiding spot.

Spend time each day visiting with your cat. There is no magical amount of time that will work with every cat. You might choose to spend one longer chunk of time in the room or divide it up into several shorter visits. Be sure that you are speaking softly and moving slowly when in the room. Slow blinking, commonly called “kitty kisses,” does help to soothe some cats, and you might even get your cat blinking back at you.

Do not punish your cat for stress-induced behaviors. The above tips should yield some results within a few days, although it could take several weeks for your cat to become comfortable. If you have any questions, contact our foster co-ordinator for further ideas and clarification.

Veterinary care

Because we are ultimately responsible for your foster animals’ well-being, our staff must authorize any and all treatment for foster animals at our approved veterinary partners. If your foster kittens need to go to the veterinarian, **please notify the foster coordinator** by phone. The foster coordinator has to give authorization for the animal to be taken for off site treatment. Remember, **foster parents will be responsible for payment of any medical care if they take their foster animal to a veterinarian without authorization from the foster coordinator or shelter manager.**

For **non-emergency** situations, please understand that our partner veterinarian clinics book quickly and may not be available for same-day appointments. **We ask that you schedule basic non-emergency appointments at least 24 hours in advance. To schedule an appointment with the veterinarian, please contact the Foster Coordinator at sheltermanager@wildrosehumane.ca**

Signs of illness and what to do next

Kittens do a good job of masking when they don’t feel well, so determining if a foster kitten is under the weather will require diligent observation of the kittens’ daily activity and appetite levels. Be aware that kittens act differently at different ages. If you have any questions about the health of your foster kittens, please contact the foster coordinator, who will be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

Eye discharge. It is normal for kittens to have some discharge from their eyes when they wake up. But if a kitten has yellow or green discharge, or swelling around the eyes (making it hard for him to open his eyes), or the third eyelid is showing, you need to contact the foster coordinator.

Sneezing and nasal discharge. Occasional sneezing is common in kittens. If the sneezing becomes more frequent, examine the discharge coming from the sneeze. If the discharge is clear, the infection is probably viral and medication may not be necessary. If the discharge becomes colored, contact the foster coordinator to schedule an appointment because the kittens may have a bacterial infection. If they start to breathe with an open mouth or wheeze, call the foster coordinator. Also, once you notice nasal discharge, monitor the kittens' eating habits more closely to ensure that they are still eating.

Loss of appetite. Your foster kittens may be stressed after arriving in your home, and stress can cause lack of appetite. Unwillingness to eat in kittens can be very serious, so pay close attention to whether the kittens are eating. Kittens should eat on a four- to eight-hour schedule, depending on their age. With a kitten who is not eating, please do not change the kitten's diet without contacting the foster department. An abrupt change in diet can cause diarrhea, which will lead to dehydration.

Lethargy. The activity level of your kittens will vary with each kitten in your litter and with age. Sick kittens may have lower energy levels and just want to sit in your lap or on the floor and not move much or play. If a kitten cannot be roused or seems weak and unable to stand, please contact the foster coordinator. Note: Some undersocialized kittens will move less because they are frightened. If you have a fearful group of kittens, it can be more difficult to determine if their energy levels are low.

Dehydration. Dehydration is usually associated with diarrhea, vomiting and/or loss of appetite. To test for dehydration, gently pinch the kitten's skin around the scruff area. If the skin stays taut, the kitten is dehydrated. Please call the foster coordinator as dehydration can be fatal in kittens.

Vomiting. If a foster kitten has thrown up two or more times in one day, please notify the foster coordinator. If there is bile or blood in the vomit, please call immediately.

Pain or strain while urinating. When kittens first go into a foster home, they may not urinate due to stress. If a kitten hasn't urinated in more than 24 hours or if you notice the kitten straining to urinate with little or no results, or crying out when urinating, please contact the foster coordinator immediately because it may be indicative of an infection or a urethral obstruction, which can be life-threatening.

Diarrhea. In kittens, it can be tricky to determine if diarrhea is a problem. Soft stool diarrhea, most likely caused by stress, is normal for the first two days after you take kittens home. Kittens who are nursing tend to have loose stool, but if it is watery or very large in volume, that's a concern. By the time kittens are five weeks old and are eating consistently on their own, they should have firm, normal stool. If your foster kittens have liquid stool, please contact the foster coordinator in case a vet appointment needs to be scheduled; the kittens may need medication.

- Fading kitten syndrome: Symptoms include unwillingness to eat, dehydration, lethargy, weight loss, coldness to the touch, and difficulty with breathing or labored breathing.
- Panleukopenia (feline distemper): Symptoms include unwillingness to eat, vomiting, diarrhea and/or dehydration. The diarrhea often has a mucoid texture and/or is bloody.

Once your kittens are using a litter box, please monitor the box daily. Remember that diarrhea will dehydrate your kittens, so be proactive about contacting the foster coordinator if you notice any diarrhea. If a kitten has bloody or mucoid diarrhea, please contact the foster coordinator immediately.

Frequent ear scratching. A foster kitten may have ear mites if she scratches her ears often and/or shakes her head frequently, or if you see a dark discharge that resembles coffee grounds when you look in her ears. Ear mites can be treated by a veterinarian, so please call or email the foster coordinator for an appointment.

Hair loss. Please contact the foster coordinator if you notice any hair loss on your foster kittens. It is normal for cats to have thin fur around the lips, eyelids and in front of the ears, but clumpy patches of hair loss or thinning hair can indicate ringworm or dermatitis.

Criteria for emergencies

What constitutes a medical emergency in a kitten? Here are some specific symptoms that could indicate an emergency:

- Not breathing or labored breathing
- Symptoms of fading kitten syndrome or distemper
- Signs of extreme dehydration: dry gums, weakness, vomiting, not urinating, skin tenting
- Abnormal lethargy or unable to stand
- Unconsciousness or unable to wake up
- Cold to the touch

- Broken bones
- Any trauma: hit by a car, dropped, stepped on, etc.
- A large wound or profuse bleeding that doesn't stop when pressure is applied

If a foster kitten displays any of these symptoms, please contact your foster coordinator immediately. If the animal is vomiting or has diarrhea, but is still active, eating and drinking, you can probably wait until the next day to get help. However, if the animal is lethargic and shows no interest in food or water, please call your co-ordinator that day.

If you think your foster pet may incur permanent damage or pass away if not seen by a veterinarian immediately, please proceed to the approved emergency clinic and start the emergency phone chain on the way.

Didsbury Vet Clinic: 2601 16 St Didsbury 403-335-3519

Chinook Country Vet Clinic: 4501 46 Ave Olds 403-556-6414

Riverstone Vet Clinic: 32539, Range Rd 43, Mountain View County (Sundre)
403-507-4412

Cleaning Procedures

It is important that all items and areas used by a sick foster cat or kitten be cleaned thoroughly. You can use a 10% bleach solution to reliably kill most viruses and bacteria. Items to be cleaned should be thoroughly wetted with the bleach solution and allowed to stand for several minutes before rinsing. Foster homes that have recently fostered a cat or kitten with panleukopenia (feline distemper) or another extremely contagious disease may be asked to wait several months or more before fostering another cat or kitten.

In order to help ensure the health and safety of your foster cat, The Wild Rose Humane Society asks that you adhere to the guidelines set forth, including the following:

- Always keep an ID tag attached to a properly fitted collar that will remain on your foster cat at all times;
- Keep your foster cat indoors at all times.
- Advise the WRHS if you are no longer able to care for your foster cat. **Do not** give your foster cat to another person. Please contact the foster co-ordinator if you need to have your foster cat removed from your home. Thank you for becoming a foster family! If you have any questions, please contact us at 403-335-8297.

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