



# Nursing Mom with Kittens Foster Guide

**Thank you for joining us in saving lives!** This program saves at-risk nursing mothers and their kittens by placing them into dedicated foster homes ready to provide mom with a quiet place to raise her kittens. Fostering a nursing mom cat requires keeping a close eye on her appetite, behavior, and her ability to care for her litter. This is a guide about caring for nursing moms and their kittens from start to finish!



## Supplies

**Supplies needed** for nursing moms with kittens that you will want to have on hand ahead of time, or PAWS can loan/provide:

- Starter supply of dry kitten food & wet kitten food– we can provide more if needed!
- PAWS covers medical care and treatments until adoption (minus FIV/FelV testing)!
- KMR formula, bottles, and miracle nipples, if mom is not caring for the kittens properly, and you have to step in to help with feeding
- Safe and secure carrier (or two for a family of 3+ as they get bigger)
- Kitchen scale and a notebook to monitor kittens' weights
- Baby wipes, soft tissues, cotton pads, or cotton balls (to clean kittens if needed)
- Small litter pan for kittens once they're mobile ~3 weeks (cardboard boxes from wet food packaging work great)
- Medium to large litter pan for mom
- Non-clumping litter is safest to have around kittens
- Heat source, like a heating pad or snuggle disc
- Playpen for when kittens start walking
- Baby gate for securing doorways (optional)
- Dish soap (for baths)
- Tweezers and flea comb (to pick off fleas)
- Vaseline (for their rear ends, in case they get a little sore)
- For emergencies: NutriCal, Karo syrup to rub on gums for low glucose
- For emergencies: Thermometer



**Pro tip!** Set up an online wishlist to share with your network so that anyone who would like to support you can donate supplies! Many people who aren't able to foster still want to help!

## Setting Up Your Foster Space!

**Separate foster space:** Mother cats (queens) need a clean, warm, dry, quiet, and out-of-the-way space separate from other animals and busy parts of the home. An easy-to-clean space without carpet is recommended! Providing a separate foster space for the mother cat to safely raise her kittens reduces her stress as well as reduces the risk of disease transmission and stress to your pets. Use baby gates at the door if you have nosy pets!

**Introducing resident pets & FIV/FelV testing:** Mother cats are easily stressed and have a lot of hormones! She can potentially become protective and aggressive towards other curious pets and could redirect her aggression to you. We strongly recommend *not* introducing your resident pets to nursing moms, even after the 2-week isolation period.



If you decide to introduce your pets to your fosters, ALWAYS confirm with PAWS staff first. Ensure everyone is healthy for at least 2 weeks outside the shelter & are tested for FIV/FelV & have had at least one FVRCP shot!

**Nesting areas as they grow:** Offering several options for a queening/nesting box is essential for the mother and her babies. Cardboard boxes or playpens with the top open work great and should be large enough for the queen to comfortably lie away from the litter if she chooses, but small enough so the kittens are easy for you to reach. The sides need to be high enough to prevent the kittens from wandering off, getting lost, or injuring themselves, but low enough for the mother to be able to come and go with ease.

Note that the mother cat may choose a different area to nurse her kittens, like under furniture or in a bathtub. The goal is for the mother to feel safe and comfortable caring for her kittens, so as long as the kittens are safe and warm, you can allow her to nurse the kittens wherever she chooses in the foster space. You can also consider putting up some makeshift barriers so the kittens cannot wander throughout a bigger foster space.

Once the kittens are more mobile and reach 4-5 weeks old, they can freely roam a small secure foster room like a bathroom, spare room, office, or large playpen. Make sure to “kitten-proof” the area before the kittens enter the space. Block underneath furniture, check for hiding places like holes in walls or mattresses, place baby gates at doors and stairs to prevent quick escapes, and put away dangerous or breakable knick-knacks.

**Bedding:** Clean, dry, soft, smooth, and unravel-proof bedding should be placed on top of newspaper or a puppy/pee pad. The area where the kittens are must be kept warm, clean, and smooth, so that the area around their umbilical cord(s) does not become infected. Never place kittens in deep, loose bedding ( i.e. straw, hay, or shavings, etc.). These materials could obstruct breathing or be inhaled and cause respiratory infections. Examine towels or blankets after each washing to ensure they remain free from any holes or frayed edges. Bedding on the nesting box floor should provide good traction for the young ones to crawl around without slipping.

**Pro tip!** Momma can have short breaks from her babies during the day for self-care!

## Caring for a Nursing Mother with Kittens

**Mother cat behavior and care for their kittens:** Many mom cats can be incredibly friendly to people and attentive to their kittens, but due to a few factors, there can occasionally be challenges with their behavior, health, or care for their kittens. Try to keep the following things in mind. If they pop up, the family may need some extra help!



- Hormones can influence behavior
- Stressors around the home - certain people, kids, noises, or other animals, either in the home or outdoors
- Mom may have spent some or all of her life outdoors
- Illness on top of already giving her all to caring for kittens
- Rejecting her kittens due to illness, injury, etc. This is typically an instinct or from stress.
- Aggression towards her kittens or towards people in the home

Check in with our team if any of these issues are popping up. Solutions can include:

- Supplemental feeding: See our [Orphaned Kitten Guide](#) for tips on how to supplement feed and care for kittens if mom needs help.
- Separating the mother cat in an isolated space without the kittens to determine if her behavior changes.

**Mother cat diet:** Because milk production requires energy, the mother cat's food and water supply should be increased 2 to 4 times her normal intake. She can be fed kitten food to provide higher calorie intake and she can eat as much as she wants! She also needs plenty of fresh water to keep up her hydration. Ensure the water bowl is kept safely away from the kittens so there's no risk of drowning.

**Mother-kitten relationship:** A mother's direct interaction with her young kittens involves the "brrp" or "chirp" call as she approaches them. It also includes nuzzling and licking them to awaken them and to stimulate urination and defecation. Initially, the kitten's activities are restricted to crawling along the mother's body and nuzzling against her to locate a nipple, often in competition with littermates. The kittens suckle, lie by the mother, move around near her, and call out to her. A call frequently given by the kittens is the cry associated with distress. The call is often given when a kitten awakens and is hungry, when a kitten's movement is restricted (i.e., it is stuck under its mother), or when a kitten becomes isolated and cold.

**Warmth:** The mother cat should keep her kittens nice and toasty warm, but it's important to monitor to ensure she is lying with them most of the day. It's crucial to keep young kittens warm, as they cannot regulate their body temperature until ~4 weeks old, and a low body temperature can be very dangerous. Prolonged exposure to cold results in a drop of body temperature (hypothermia) and, therefore, a drop in the blood sugar level (hypoglycemia). The kitten's internal organs begin a systematic shutdown. If a kitten feels cold to the touch, hypothermia has likely set in. A kitten's condition is critical at this point.

If the mother is not keeping her kittens warm, you can add a snuggle disc or heat pad to the space where the kittens most often lie. Be very careful with heating pads as they can become too hot and cause burns. They should NEVER be placed in direct contact with kittens. Be sure to keep temps set to low, and they should be placed underneath a blanket and only cover the bottom half of the nesting area. Always leave an

area for kittens to move off the heat in case it's too hot for them. The bedding temperature should be around 85°F. Drafts/dampness will chill neonates, even when the room temperature is sufficient.

### Warming a Chilled Kitten

1. **Never feed a kitten that is chilled or cold; this will kill the kitten!**
2. Place the kitten in a warm space and "burrito-wrap" it in a towel or blanket
3. Gently massage the kitten to get the circulation going
4. Administering 0.01 cc/ml of Karo Syrup orally or by rubbing it on the gums of a hypoglycemic kitten will raise the blood sugar level of the kitten and help stabilize the kitten while you are warming it. *NutriCal is also effective. If you don't have NutriCal or Karo Syrup, you can mix a solution of water and sugar in equal parts, administered at 0.01 cc/ml.*

**Suckling** is accompanied by kneading against the mother's abdomen. It is thought that these kneading movements stimulate the mother's milk flow. It also helps to develop the kitten's muscles and aids in digestion. The kittens may initially spend nearly 8 hours a day suckling, but this activity decreases as they grow older. Please email the foster team if the mother cat seems to struggle with feeding her kittens or rejects a kitten. The kitten may need you to supplementally feed them with a bottle and kitten formula.

It's natural for kittens to suckle on each other or on your fingers, even after they're finished eating. This can be harmless *unless* you notice that this activity is irritating the other kittens' fur or skin. Please email the foster team if kittens are suckling on other kittens' genitals. This can cause serious permanent damage.

**Weighing:** The kittens should be weighed twice daily **in grams** and recorded. Doing this will help you catch any weight issues early. If a kitten is losing/not gaining weight for over 24 hours, please email the foster team. If the mother cat becomes distressed or aggressive when you handle her kittens, please email the foster team and hold off on daily weigh-ins until you speak with us.

**Sanitation:** Please wash your hands before and after handling kittens to prevent spreading any illness. The mother cat should keep the kittens clean and dry, but if she's not, clean kittens' faces and rear ends with a warm, wet washcloth or unscented baby wipes – any dried-up milk, urine, or poop can cause severe skin infections and rawness. If their skin is red or raw, send a photo to the foster team. You can use Desitin or Vaseline to provide relief in the meantime.

**Cleaning:** The living area should always be kept clean, which will require "spot cleaning" of messy areas several times a day, as well as "deep cleaning" as needed.

Spot cleaning includes straightening up, cleaning up messes, and scooping the litter box daily. Wet food should not be left out for more than a few hours and should be discarded and replaced with fresh food. Wet food should NEVER be left to grow mold or attract bugs. Bedding should be kept clean, dry, and fresh. If the kittens have accidents, the bedding may need to be changed more often than once each day and washed.

Deep cleaning may stress mom, so only do it if there is a sanitation concern like feces or food requiring a good scrub. When deep cleaning, place the kittens/cats in a



separate area or carrier until the living area is dry. All surfaces, bowls, toys, litter boxes, etc., should be disinfected with a cleaner and wiped down. Cats and kittens can become reinfected with worms through soiled bedding and litter.

**Pro tip!** [Rescue Disinfectant](#) is a safe hydrogen peroxide-based cleaner designed for animal shelters and is great for use in foster homes. If used properly, it can kill common kitten illnesses like Panleuk and Ringworm. It can be purchased online, or if you'd like some disinfectant in a spray bottle from our clinic, please email us!

Also, deep clean thoroughly between litters! Wash all bedding on high heat with detergent and bleach (color-safe OK). Use Rescue cleaner or diluted bleach on all floors, surfaces, litter boxes, and carriers. Vacuum floors and couches. Throw away any porous toys or blankets that may have been in contact with Ringworm or Panleuk.

**Fleas:** Often, when kittens are born outside, they can become a host for fleas. Fleas can quickly cause anemia and kill cats and kittens! While adult cats can receive topical flea treatment, these products are too harmful to be used on kittens under 1 ½ lbs, so a flea bath is essential to remove fleas. Flea baths may need to be repeated if you don't get all of the fleas and eggs the first time. Only bathe kittens that are stable and not too fragile or sick.

#### Steps to Giving a Flea Bath (Video by Kitten Lady)

1. Heat the room you will be bathing the kitten in to 85°F and keep them warm throughout!
2. Make sure the sink water is lukewarm. Do not submerge the kitten's head in the water.
3. Place a ring of soap around their neck to prevent fleas from crawling onto their face. Lather the kitten with water and dish soap to drown fleas. For the head, use a soft sponge or cotton pad.
4. You MUST leave the dish soap lathered in the kitten's coat for 10 mins to break down flea eggs.
5. Keep the kitten warm during the 10 minutes by wrapping it in a warm towel.
6. Pick off the fleas with tweezers or a flea comb. Put the flea(s) in a cup or bowl of water so it dies.
7. Rinse the dish soap off the kitten with warm, clean water.
8. Wrap the kitten in a warm towel and thoroughly pat dry.
9. *Optional:* Use a hairdryer set to low/warm; to dry the kitten, oscillate the dryer at a 6" distance.
10. Place the kitten on a warm heat source!

**Aging:** Our medical staff will assess each kitten and estimate their age based on weight & teeth, but sometimes it's hard to tell! It's important to monitor the kitten's growth and progress closely. See Page 5 of the [Kitten Lady Booklet](#) for tips on accurately aging kittens or use this [Age Calculator](#). Let us know if you think the age on their records may be inaccurate.

**Weaning:** Weaning includes acclimating a kitten to food other than its mother's milk. As the kittens become older and more mobile, they become increasingly responsible for approaching the mother and initiating suckling. In the later stages of the weaning period (at about 7 weeks old), the kittens become almost wholly responsible for initiating suckling. The mother may actively impede these efforts by blocking access to her nipples or by removing herself from the kittens' proximity- this is normal.

At this time, or as early as 4 weeks, wet paté kitten food can be introduced to encourage the kittens to eat on their own. When giving kittens wet food, the mother can get a "break" and be removed from the space to encourage them to learn to eat on their own. *For more tips on weaning, visit [kittenlady.org/weaning](http://kittenlady.org/weaning).*

**Mobility & play:** At the same time they begin teething, kittens will want to have more space to explore (such as a small playpen). Continue to keep them separated from your pet(s) and/or other fosters since they have not had any vaccinations, are not tested for FIV/FeLV, and their immune systems are still developing. You can start introducing toys - jingly and crinkly toys are great! Remember, kittens are naturally very curious and should be kept in a confined space so they do not get hurt. Do not leave any feathers or string toys unattended with kittens due to ingestion risk.

**Socialization:** Daily socialization sessions are important in shaping the kittens' future personalities and emotional growth. Simple play and restraint exercises will familiarize a kitten with having its paws touched (front and back), mouth opened, and ears touched. Regular grooming sessions and body massages will prevent skin sensitivity or aversion to touch. It is vital to include petting, talking, and playing with foster kittens and cats in order for them to develop good "people skills." *Check out this great [guide to socializing kittens from Chirrup and Chatter!](#)*

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## Medical

**Vaccine Boosters:** When a kitten reaches 1lb (typically around 4 weeks old), we should begin their FVRCP vaccinations. This is given at our vaccine clinic and is vital to keeping kittens healthy and safe. Foster kittens will need booster shots of the **FVRCP vaccine every 2-4 weeks until they are 18-20 weeks old** and their **Rabies vaccination once they reach 3 lbs.**

If a kitten still has pending vaccines but is old enough for spay/neuter (1.5 lbs+), they should still be adopted asap after surgery. Coming in for the remaining vaccinations will be the responsibility of the adopter. Recent adopters can get their remaining kitten and cat vaccines done at either of our PAWS clinics for free, or they can schedule the vaccines through their own chosen vet's office at their own cost.

**Spay/Neuter Surgery:** Mother cats can be spayed as soon as the kittens are weaned. This gives you the option to find a home for the mother even before her kittens are ready for adoption. Or, if the entire family is content and happy and you're okay waiting a little longer, you can save yourself a trip to the shelter by scheduling the mother cat for spay surgery when the kittens are ready to be spayed/neutered. **When the kittens are healthy and 1 ½ - 2lbs+ (6-8 weeks), schedule their spay/neuter surgery appointments.**

After the mother is spayed, plan to keep her separated from her kittens during recovery. Her kittens should not be allowed to nurse from her since her abdomen will be sensitive, and nursing could cause infection.

Male kittens heal pretty fast and will not need a cone. Female kittens will be required to wear an e-collar for a minimum of 10 days. They should have limited activity and limited use of stairs. Do not allow them to lick or chew at stitches. Keep the incision dry and check daily for signs of infection. If you notice any redness, swelling, drainage from the incision site, lethargic behavior, or vomiting after 24 hours, please contact the foster office to see if you need to bring them in to be seen by a veterinarian.

Kittens hissing and aggression are normal for up to 48 hours after surgery due to the anesthesia. You may need to separate them if this happens, so plan ahead. Adopters can take the kittens home right after the surgery, but it's recommended that the foster give the kittens 2-3 days to recover in their home.

**Pro tip!** Monitor mom for mastitis (redness, irritation, discharge, pain, or skin feeling hot along her abdomen).

**Illness:** It is important as a foster parent to monitor the family closely for signs of illness. Newborn kittens get antibodies from their mother's milk, but their immune systems are still very weak, and they are fragile, so catching signs of illness early is crucial.

If a nursing queen is showing signs of illness, it is very possible her kittens may catch symptoms from her. If kittens start showing signs of illness, whether or not momma cat is healthy or sick, *everyone should come get looked at by a veterinarian as soon as possible*. Do not wait multiple days for neonates that are showing potential signs of illness, they may need medication asap to prevent symptoms from affecting their appetites and energy levels from dropping.



- **“Time Sensitive” Non Emergencies:** Reasons to email [foster@phillypaws.org](mailto:foster@phillypaws.org) with “Time Sensitive” in the subject line and plan to come to Foster Walk-in Clinic, but not contact by emergency phone - *these should be handled within 24 hours!*
  - If a kitten has diarrhea, little to no urine, or is vomiting
  - Sudden changes in energy level or behavior
  - Not eating or weight loss - don't forget to weigh your kittens, ideally at least once a day
  - Excessive sneezing or coughing combined with nasal discharge, congestion- especially for neonates!
  
- **“URGENT” During Business Hours (9 am-5 pm):** If you have an emergency during business hours, please email [foster@phillypaws.org](mailto:foster@phillypaws.org) with “URGENT” in the subject line, and we will advise you of the best course of action.
  
- **True 911-level Emergencies Only After Hours (5pm-9am) - Call the emergency phone!** If a kitten is showing any of these serious symptoms, it is an emergency, and they may be in danger of dying:
  - Unable to lift their head on their own, lethargic (they are not moving when you touch them)
  - Unconsciousness, seizures, uneven pupil dilation, or fainting
  - Open-mouth breathing, labored breathing, excessive panting, or incessant coughing
  - Crackling/popping sounds when they breathe
  - Repeated vomiting of bile or blood +/- severe diarrhea
  - Pronounced limping or paralysis (mild limping is not an emergency and may just need rest)
  - Pale gums: Gently push on gums, and they should return to pink within 1-2 seconds
  - Dehydration: gums that are tacky (sticky) to the touch, eyes look sunken in, skin tent does not return to normal position in 1-3 seconds (gently pinch the skin on the kitten's upper back to check skin tent)
  - Excessively cold to the touch with little movement and will not warm up with a heat source.
  - Fever (feels hot to the touch or above 103+°F on a rectal thermometer)
  - Note: If a kitten has passed away in your care, bring their body back to our site during operating hours and do **not** bury it
  
- **While waiting for a response to an email or the emergency phone:**
  - If dehydrated, attempt to *slowly* syringe-feed the kitten a small amount of water or Pedialyte
  - Give NutriCal to stabilize
  - Try syringe feeding the kitten instead of bottle feeding – do not force it. Feed drop by drop.
  - Keep the kitten warm, dry, and comfortable
  - If symptoms appear to be Fading Kitten Syndrome, start Fading Kitten Protocol (see below)

**Fading Kitten Syndrome** is not a disease, but rather a collection of symptoms that develop in neonatal kittens due to many possible underlying causes. Most often, Fading Kitten Syndrome is escalated due to hypothermia (low body temperature) and hypoglycemia (low blood sugar), and correcting these can save the kitten. **If you notice these symptoms, contact the foster office and start the [Fading Kitten Protocol](#) immediately!**

- Extreme lethargy (unable to stand, hold head up, not responding when touched)
- Low body temp (feels cold to the touch or below 98°F on a rectal thermometer)
- Increased respiratory effort (gasping for breath)
- Pale gums (white)
- Odd vocalizations (cries of pain)
- Dehydration
- Muscle wasting (loss of muscle tone in the face and body, causing the kitten to look gaunt or frail. The kitten may develop a triangular-looking face.)

**Gentle Note:** Sadly, there are times when kittens fail to thrive in our care and unexpectedly pass away, even with our best efforts. If you provided all recommended care, please don't ever blame yourself! We know that you did everything you could, gave them a chance to thrive, and showed them a loving home. Please let staff know if you need more emotional support, even if you just need to talk it through in person or over the phone. Thank you for putting so much time, energy, and effort into helping PAWS save lives!

## Adoption

*Foster parents sometimes hesitate to foster mother cats because they worry that the mother will never get adopted and leave their home, but this is not true! She has several options depending on her sociability.*

**Adoption Process:** Once spay or neuter surgeries are scheduled, you can start promoting your fosters for adoption. See our [Cat Foster Guide](#) for full details about the adoption process. For social, friendly mother cats or kittens, they can be placed at one of our adoption centers!



**Other Options for Mother Cats:** Keep in mind that some mother cats in our care are stray community cats that may have grown up outdoors. Those who have had limited experience around humans may not be good candidates for a traditional home adoption route. We want to prevent a cat like this from being returned if they still do not appear to be adjusting well to home life after having had ample time to adjust in foster care. The best way to support these special momma cats is by finding the mom a home *she* will be happy in, even if that may not be a “traditional” home environment shared with humans full-time.

If the location where the mother was found is safe and she was found in good condition, there is the option to return her to her community as a colony/outdoor kitty, where she is most comfortable and familiar.

If the location is not safe, she may be eligible to be placed as a Working Cat (eg, at a barn, brewery, etc), where she can live an independent life with plenty of space, and be happy and confident. If you are concerned about a mother cat's sociability and whether she may be struggling to adjust to living with humans, please email the foster team so we can provide support!