

Kitten Foster Handbook

The Humane Society of Mason County



Welcome to Fostering

Dear Foster Family,

You are about to embark on a memorable live-saving adventure! Thank you for opening your home and heart to orphan kittens. Kittens younger than eight weeks old are the most at-risk population in our community.

Fostering orphaned kittens is a rewarding process that saves hundreds of lives in our community each year, and we could not do it without you! In this manual, you will find helpful tips to ensure success.

Orphaned kittens require consistent love and attention that is difficult to provide in a shelter environment. These kittens are typically placed in foster homes until they are big enough to undergo spay/neuter surgery at 2 lbs or roughly 2 months of age. We prefer fosters to care for more than one kitten at a time to help promote socialization and normal behavioral growth. When kittens are unable to have appropriate social interaction with other kittens it can stunt proper socialization and lead to behavioral problems. Multiple kittens are not only fun, they can also self-entertain.

There are several requirements to be the perfect foster for this type of animal. If the requirements included in the following section do not work well with your current schedule, please let us know. We can help you find a foster situation that will work best for you!

Are You a Kitten Foster Candidate?

TIME

Are you able to devote the required time daily?

Are you able to transport your foster animal to appropriate locations for wellness exams, vaccinations and any unseen emergencies?

SPACE

Are you able to separate your foster animals from your household pets for at least two weeks to protect them from illnesses and allow for proper adjustment period?

Are you able to handle cleaning procedures such as washing hands after every encounter and cleaning and disinfecting the kittens' quarters routinely?

Are you able to handle any potential home damage (carpet, clothing, and/or furniture) associated with animals?

CARE

Are you prepared to handle sickness or possible death of your foster animal?

Are you able to emotionally handle letting go of the foster animal after becoming attached once their foster period is over?

Are you able to handle the potential of foster animals carrying illness that could affect your household animals / family?

If you're able to do all these things, then you are ready to become a foster parent!

Types of Foster Kittens

For the most part, kittens in the foster care program are those who have not yet reached the 2-pound minimum weight required to undergo spay/neuter surgery prior to adoption. There are some differences in the types of kittens needing foster care.

BOTTLE BABIES: These are orphaned neonatal kittens ranging in age from 1 day to 4 weeks old without a mother cat to nurse from. They need to be bottle-fed every 3 to 4 hours around the clock for the first 3 weeks; less often from 4 weeks and on. They need to be burped, and stimulated to urinate and defecate after each feeding. They also need to be weighed daily, and kept clean and warm.

MOTHERS AND KITTENS: These kittens may range from 1 day old and older but have their mother to care for them and nurse from. This foster will involve primarily caring for the mother cat until the kittens are about 5 weeks old. Around this time mom begins to wean the kittens and they start eating food, which you will provide, on their own. Ideally, mom is kept with her kittens until they are 8 weeks old, which benefits the kittens social skill development.

WEIGHT GAINERS (4 WEEKS +): It usually takes kittens about 2 months (8 weeks) to reach the 2 pound minimum weight required for spay/neuter surgery. So, this could be as short as a 2-week foster commitment, or as long as 8 weeks. They are eating on their own, usually have good litter box habits and have learned to clean themselves. However, this is also the time they are transitioning from formula to food and may have gastrointestinal problems leading to diarrhea. Younger kittens in this group are often messy eaters too, requiring frequent cleaning.

BEHAVIORAL KITTENS: Ideally, kittens should be introduced to human handling between 2 and 7 weeks of age. If not, they will learn to fear human interaction. These un-socialized or “spicy” kittens usually require intensive treatment due to a short window of time you have to convince them that human contact can be pleasurable. This takes a lot of patience and time interacting with them.

Getting Ready

PREPARING THE KITTEN ROOM

Before you bring home your foster kittens, make sure that you have a suitable place for them to stay. A bathroom or small bedroom often works well. The kitten room should adhere to the following guidelines:

NEEDED SUPPLIES

HSMC will provide you with all of the supplies you will need. Supplies that you are welcome to contribute may include extra soft blankets and bedding and if necessary, enclosures, or baby gates, to control the area kittens will grow up in, depending on your space. Also cats love scratching posts or cat trees, but you would have to be able to disinfect or dispose of them.

CARRIER: An appropriate sized carrier will be provided to transport the fosters home and also to bring them back and forth for vetting. Please note that foster kittens **MUST** be transported in carriers at all times. Carriers may also be used as their “sleeping quarters” if the door is left open and there is sufficient room for all to stretch out and be comfy.

FOOD BOWLS: For 2-3 kittens, one bowl of dry food, left out all the time, and for 4+ kittens, two bowls. It is best to have a separate dish per kitten for canned wet food to ensure that each kitten gets its fair share. Inevitably there is a food bully in the litter that may crowd out a less assertive sibling. If you have separate food bowls, you can observe which kitten is not getting enough food, and which kitten is hogging more than his share. Sometimes, separating, these kittens, will even out the food intake.

WATER BOWL: Please use ceramic/porcelain or stainless steel bowls and NOT plastic, as plastic is difficult to disinfect due to its porosity. The heavier the bowl the better to not tip over.

CAT LITTER: There are many types of litter available and they are not all safe for kittens to use. Clay clumping litter is very convenient, but if ingested in large amounts, can become solid inside a kitten and cause blockage. Most young kittens don't eat litter, but some do. A safe alternative is a clumping litter made of wheat, or corn, and if ingested, is not dangerous. There are also safe non-clumping litters made from wood, paper or pine pellets. The most widely used is the clay clumping litter, which is fine for older kittens and adult cats. We will provide the most appropriate litter for your kittens.

LITTER BOX: We can supply you with medium sized, plastic litter boxes. The recommendation is 1 box per cat, plus 1 extra. However, if your kittens are in a small room, 2 boxes, cleaned often, can be sufficient for a litter of 4 or 5 kittens.

FOOD: You will be supplied with both dry and canned kitten food, and formula if needed. If, for whatever reason, your kittens don't like the food provided we will provide you with an alternative diet. Any change in your foster's diet may cause gastrointestinal problems, so feeding the same food consistently will help their digestive system. It's also good to keep track of the type of food so we can inform adopters of the current diets. A mother cat is given the same dry and canned KITTEN food (rather than adult cat food) for extra nutrition while nursing. For orphaned newborns who need to be bottle-fed, we will provide you with kitten milk replacer (KMR) formula and bottles. Providing dry food at all times is recommended, plus feeding fresh canned food several times a day.

BLANKETS AND BEDDING: Micro fleece is the best material for small kittens. It's soft, like Mom's fur and it traps their own body heat. There are many inexpensive micro fleece baby blankets and bedding material out there, often at second-hand stores. We will provide towels and if available, cat beds and blankets.

HEATING DEVICE: From 3-4 weeks of age and older, the floor temperature of the kitten's environment should be as close to 70- 75°F. For younger ones, their sleeping environment should be closer to 85-90°F. In order to maintain this temperature, you will need a heating device, which we will supply if needed. It is important to always make sure there is a large enough area for the kittens to move off of the heating source as they may get too warm. Electrical heating pads (made for animals) on low heat or warming discs can be used. Either one needs to be covered or wrapped in a towel to safeguard kittens.

SCALE: We will provide a digital animal scale to all our foster families. Keeping a daily record of kitten's weight is very important, especially for newborn kittens and those up to 4 weeks old. A weight gain of 3-4 ounces each week usually indicates these very young kittens are doing well. We will provide a form to fill out, or you can make your own.

CLEANING, BATHING: Small, soft wash cloths, cosmetic rounds or sponges cut into small squares are great for simple wipes of food or eye goobers off of kitten's face. For messier situations, some fragrance-free baby wipes work well. And if the kitten needs a butt bath or a full (body only) water immersion, fragrance-free baby or pet shampoo does the trick.

SCRATCHING POST OR TREE: We can provide disposable cardboard scratching boxes, which you would throw away between litters.

Safeguarding all Animals

First and foremost, we want to protect the health of you, your resident pets and the foster kittens, so we need to prevent your pets from introducing disease to the foster kittens and the fosters introducing diseases to your pets. There are even some diseases that can be transmitted to people, such as ringworm.

HSMC recommends that all foster volunteers keep their resident animals current on their vaccinations and flea meds. In addition, foster kittens **MUST** be separated from your resident pets for a minimum period of 2 weeks, which is a sufficient time for most incubating diseases to become apparent. However, we strongly recommend, that fosters be kept separate from your resident pets for the **entire** fostering period. Having a totally separate room for the fosters would be ideal.

Washing hands with soap and water should be practiced regularly, both before and after contact, with foster kittens. We are concerned with the health of ALL animals under your care. As thorough and careful as we try to be in our examinations of the foster kittens before sending them out, there is still a real risk of disease transmission. Hence the strong recommendation to keep your pets separated from the fosters. As a reminder, the Humane Society of Mason County cannot be responsible for the health of your resident pets.

Cleaning between litters of kittens is another precaution against the spread of disease. In between litters of kittens, your fostering room and all related foster kitten items will need to be sanitized before another litter is brought home. All surfaces should first be cleaned with a detergent (such as 409 or Dawn/water mixture) and then disinfected with a bleach solution (1 ounce bleach to 32 ounces water). Bleach is easily inactivated by organic debris, so cleaning first is imperative. Probably the best cleaner is Disinfectant Rescue, used by vets to kill most bacteria and viruses. It comes in liquid or wipes.

Kitten Care

FEEDING GUIDELINE

Here's a brief summary of the feeding protocol for kittens up to eight weeks old. DO NOT give milk or other dairy products, as it will lead to diarrhea.

Week 1: Bottle-feeding

Food type: Milk replacement formula

Frequency: Every 2–3 hours (8–12 times per day)

Amount: 3–4 cc per feeding, approximately 3–6 g per kitten

Week 2: Bottle-feeding

Food type: Milk replacement formula

Frequency: Every 3 hours (8 times per day)

Amount: 5–6 cc per feeding, approximately 8–15 g per kitten

Week 3: Bottle-feeding

Food type: Milk replacement formula

Frequency: Every 4 hours (6 times per day)

Amount: 13–17 cc per feeding, approximately 10–20 g per kitten

Week 4: Weaning stage

Food type: Milk replacement formula, gruel, kitten kibble and water

Frequency: Kibble, water and gruel should be available to kittens at all times; bottle-feed every 8 hours (3 times per day)

Amount: 13–17 cc per feeding with the bottle; will vary depending on how much gruel the kitten eats

Weeks 5–8: Solid food

Food type: Dry kitten food, wet kitten food and water

Frequency: Dry food available at all times

You will need to offer fresh wet food 2 to 3 times daily.

Elimination - Young kittens (3 weeks or less) need help urinating and defecating. To do so, gently rub a warm cloth or cotton pad on the anus and genital areas immediately after a feeding. This will stimulate kittens to urinate and/or defecate into the cloth or cotton pad. If a mother cat is present she will stimulate the kittens.

Heating - It is VERY important to keep young kittens (up to 8 wks old) warm. They need an environment with an area that is between 75 to 90 degrees. The microwavable heating disks are ideal, as they stay warm for up to 12 hours. Make sure that the heating disk is placed under a towel or blanket. DO NOT allow kittens to lay directly on the heating disk, to prevent burns. It is also important to make sure that the kittens have enough space to move away from the heating source. Keep in mind the smaller the litter, the more help they will need to keep warm. Larger litters are better able to keep themselves warm by piling on top of each other into a big heap. Electrical animal warming pads work well too, if the kitten's bed is near an electrical outlet. As kittens get older, they can regulate their body temperature.

Cleaning/ Bathing - Kittens are usually groomed by their mother. In the absence of the mother, you must keep the kittens clean. Dried feces in the fur can be removed with a flea comb. If the kittens have feces caked on their paws and back end, it can be easier to dip them in a warm water bath to help soften the fecal matter making it easier to remove. It's best to fill your sink or bathing container with warm water and pet shampoo first, and slowly introduce kitten to the warm water, without running the scary faucet. You can have a container of clean water ready to rinse kitten off. If the kitten doesn't mind the running water, this might be a good time to introduce her to that noise. Be sure to dry the kittens well so that they don't get chilled.

SOCIALIZATION

Socialization is a very important part of kitten care. It is your job to convince kittens that humans are kind and loving. Allow kittens to acclimate to their new environment before trying to play with them. This usually takes just one day. Outgoing kittens can be cuddled and played with. Shy kittens need to have many short encounters to encourage them that humans are friendly and loving. Hold shy kittens calmly, stroking them and talking to them in a comforting voice. Put the kitten down before he or she starts squirming. If you repeat this often, perhaps only 30 seconds at a time, shy kittens will begin to love the experience. It's important that kittens have good experiences in many new environments with many new people so that, later in life, they don't consider the new environments and people to be stressors. Their prime time for socialization is between 3 weeks to 3 months of age. As soon as you get a kitten, the clock is ticking and it's a race to get enough socialization in so that you will have a well-adapted cat.

REWARD THEM WITH FOOD - Giving kittens food is a great way for them to develop a positive association with you. When you feed them wet food, stay in the room with them. This will help them trust you. You can also try to move the plate closer your body while you sit in the room. It's a great exercise for the kittens to get comfortable with crawling in your lap to get the food. While they eat, try gently petting the kitten. Another way for them to understand that humans are okay!

PLAY, PLAY, PLAY! - The best part! Playing with your foster kittens is a great way to build trust with them. String, laser pointer, mouse toys ... whatever gets them moving! The kittens will, of course, also play amongst themselves and that should be encouraged as well.

HOLD THEM AND PICK THEM UP - Once they trust you enough to touch and pet them, pick them up and hold them as much as possible. It's important for them to get used to a human touch. Also, be sure to hold them as close to your chest as possible so that they feel safe. If they resist being picked up or held, put them down again immediately. If you hold them against their will, that just stresses them out more and they become more resistant. Try short periods of picking them up off the ground just a few inches for a few seconds. The next time, hold them higher, for longer. Soon they will trust that nothing bad is going to happen, and should feel comfortable at the height of your arms. Also, a soft blanket or towel gently wrapped around them, brings more comfort.

ADDITIONAL SOCIALIZATION - Get them comfortable in their carrier, by carrying them around in it, for short walks, let them sleep in it by taking the door off. This helps for Veterinary visits. Touch and hold separate parts of their body; feet, face, ears and tail. Spread out their toes and extend their toenails. Get them used to loud noises slowly and calmly. Hair dryers, music, toilets, running water, dishwashers, and the dreaded vacuum. Try to make the noise while they are in a closed-off nearby room. Then slowly open the doors, and move them a little closer, carefully watching their reaction, and working very slowly. One person can stay with the kitten, petting and reassuring her.

Illness and Emergencies

SIGNS OF ILLNESS

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. For example, a healthy two-week-old kitten will sleep often and get up only to nurse, whereas a healthy six-week-old kitten should have a lot of energy. If you have any questions about the health of your foster kittens, please contact the foster coordinator, who will be happy to answer your questions.

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 to make a care plan.

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. But it is important to monitor the kittens in case the problem becomes worse. If the discharge becomes colored, contact the foster coordinator to make a care plan, because the kittens may have a bacterial infection. Be sure to monitor the kittens' breathing. If they start to breathe with an open mouth or wheeze, call the foster coordinator immediately. Also, once you notice nasal discharge, monitor the kittens' eating habits more closely to ensure that they are still eating. And, of course, continue to weigh them daily.

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. If a kitten under four weeks old misses two meals or a kitten over four weeks of age goes more than 12 hours without eating, the foster coordinator should be called. Also, if a kitten less than eight weeks old does not urinate for over 12 hours, call the coordinator. 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 you notice a drop in your foster kittens' energy level, please contact the foster coordinator to make a medical appointment. If a kitten cannot be roused or seems weak and unable to stand, this is an emergency, so call the foster coordinator immediately. Note: Some undersocial 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. But tracking all behaviors in your journal will help you decide whether you should call the foster coordinator or not.

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 immediately, 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 right away.

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, however, please contact the foster coordinator. Also, 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 a sign 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 department so that a vet appointment can be scheduled; the kittens may need medication.

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 department 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 a medical appointment.

HAIR LOSS: Please contact the foster department 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. It is important to check your foster kittens' coats every day.

SERIOUS KITTEN AILMENTS

Kittens are susceptible to these illnesses:

- 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.

CRITERIA FOR TRUE EMERGENCIES

Here are some specific symptoms that could indicate an emergency:

- Not breathing or difficulty breathing
- Seizures
- Severe or abnormal lethargy or unable to stand
- Non-responsive, limp, unconscious or unable to wake up
- Broken bones
- Serious injury or trauma: hit by a car, dropped, stepped on
- A large wound or profuse bleeding that doesn't stop when pressure is applied
- Cold to the touch

If a foster kitten displays any of these symptoms, please call the foster coordinator immediately.



The Humane Society of Mason County Foster Animal Medical Triage

The goal of this protocol is to triage medical cases accurately and efficiently for foster animals. This document is broken down into three categories: True emergency, urgent care, and tech appointment.

T R U E E M E R G E N C Y	<p>What is an emergency? An emergency is defined by a life threatening event or situation, immediate medical intervention is required to save a life.</p> <p>Examples: Difficulty breathing, broken bones, seizures, limp or nonresponsive, severely lethargic underage kittens, serious injury or trauma, collapse or loss of consciousness, ect.</p>	<p>What to do: In the case of a true emergency please contact the Foster Coordinator immediately.</p> <p>The foster coordinator will either direct the foster to a full service animal hospital immediately or contact the clinic manager for next steps.</p>
U R G E N T C A R E	<p>What requires urgent care? Animals requiring urgent care are not in a life threatening condition but may require timely medical intervention.</p> <p>Examples: Neonate animals whom have not eaten in over 12 hours, persistent diarrhea or vomiting, sudden loss of appetite, consuming a foreign body (toy, rawhide, ect.), urinary changes, blood in stool, ect.</p>	<p>What to do: Contact Foster Coordinator. Foster Coordinator to gather information and contact Clinic manager.</p> <p>Appointments can be made for clinic days (Monday/Tuesday) with DVM if appropriate or be seen as urgent tech appointments during the rest of the week</p>
T E C H A P P O I N T M E N T	<p>What requires a tech appointment? Tech appointments are to be used for “routine” sick or common issues.</p> <p>Examples: Possible ear infections, coughing or sneezing, nasal or ocular discharge, diarrhea or vomiting, limping, abrasions or cuts, itchy skin or rashes, arthritis symptoms, worms/fleas/ticks, decrease in appetite, no gaining weight/growing as expected, ect.</p>	<p>What to do: Contact Foster Coordinator. Foster Coordinator to gather information and contact Clinic manager.</p> <p>Foster may be consulted via email/phone/pictures/ or physical appointment by Clinic manager to create a care plan and/or contact DVM.</p>