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Raising Orphaned Puppies and Kittens

Raising orphaned puppies and kittens can be a rewarding experience if you know what you are doing, but can be stressful and disheartening if you do not. We have developed this handout to help guide those who are new to the experience. Sometimes the newborn puppy or kitten is found as a stray, and sometimes you have to raise the newborn because the mother is unable to do so. In either case, **YOU** have to take over.

This handout includes data obtained from veterinary specialists in reproductive and neonatal care as well as helpful hints from our own staff. We will take you through the first 8 weeks of life (the most important in physical development). After 8 weeks most puppies and kittens are eating either solid or semi-solid food, able to go to the bathroom on their own, and able to clean/groom themselves.

1. Neonatal Period- this refers to the time period from birth to 14 days old. This is the most critical period for the newborn, and the most labor intensive period for the caregiver. The newborns are blind, deaf, unable to clean themselves, unable to maintain their own body temperature, and unable to swallow anything but a liquid diet.

- a. Body weight at birth- healthy kittens should weigh between 3 to 3.5 ounces (85 to 100 grams) at birth, and healthy puppies range in weight by breed. A healthy Pomeranian puppy will weigh approximately 4 ounces (114 grams) at birth, while a healthy Great Dane puppy could weigh as much as 2 pounds (908 grams). Healthy newborns will gain 5 to 10% of their body weight every day, so it is imperative to keep track of their weight daily. A gram scale will provide the most accurate measurement of weight.
- b. Body Temperature during the Neonatal Period- a healthy newborn's temperature ranges from 95 to 98 degrees Fahrenheit. Normally, newborns rely on their mother and littermates to help keep them warm. They do not develop a shiver reflex until approximately six days of age. Newborns require a warm, draft free environment. If the newborn's rectal body temperature drops below 94 degrees Fahrenheit, the newborn may stop nursing and can then become hypoglycemic (low blood sugar). There is also a risk of overheating. If newborns overheat, their sensitive skin is susceptible to burns and they can become dehydrated. Therefore, if you use a heating pad make sure the heating pad is on low, that it is placed under more than one blanket or towel, and the newborn has the ability to move away from the heat. Heat lamps should not be used unless the newborn can be monitored closely at all times.

- c. Environment- as we previously mentioned, the newborn's environment should be warm and draft free. It should also be clean. Bacteria in feces could gain access to the newborn through the skin or the umbilical cord. Therefore, it is imperative to keep the area clean and the newborn clean as well. If necessary, use a washcloth moistened with warm water or an unscented baby wipe to gently clean the puppy or kitten. Make sure that you dry the puppy or kitten thoroughly afterwards.
- d. Stimulation- for the first three weeks of life, puppies and kittens lack the ability to go to the bathroom without stimulation. Normally the mother licks the newborn's genital area and rectum to make the newborn urinate and defecate. Take a warm, moistened cotton ball or clean cloth and gently rub it on the genital area until you get urine, stool, or both. They don't always do both, but they should urinate or defecate every time you stimulate them. We recommend stimulating the puppy or kitten before and after you feed them. Sometimes they will go without stimulation, but not consistently. The stool should be soft, but not watery. You should contact a veterinarian if the puppy or kitten has not passed any stool for several days and appears to have a distended abdomen.
- e. Immune system- newborns have no immune system at birth (puppies receive less than 10% of their antibodies from the mother in the womb and kittens receive less than 5%). They acquire the antibodies needed to fight infection for the first four weeks of life from colostrum. Colostrum refers to the first milk produced by the mother. This milk is not only full of fat but also contains the needed antibodies. Unfortunately, the mother only produces colostrum for about 24 hours and the newborn's gut can only absorb colostrum for about 24 hours. If you have the mother and either she did not produce milk or she will not allow the newborn to nurse (not only ignores the puppy or kitten, but also becomes aggressive), your veterinarian can make alternate recommendations.
- f. Nutrition- appropriate formula (milk replacer) available for puppies and kittens include Esbilac® and KMR® . We recommend and carry these two formulas at our hospital. At the end of this handout we will list how to make an emergency formula, but please remember that this emergency formula is not designed to be used long term. Newborns will need to nurse often (in the beginning as often as every two to three hours), so be ready. It can be exhausting. Before you give the formula, you must warm it each time until it is about 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Testing the temperature of the formula on your inner wrist is recommended prior to feeding it. When you first start feeding, give the newborn less than what is recommended on the packaging for the first three to four days. A good rule of thumb of when to stop a feeding is that the newborn's abdomen should appear full but not distended. Please do not feed puppies and kittens like a baby (**SEE FIGURES 1 AND 2 on the next page**. Although this is a picture of a puppy, this applies for both puppies and kittens). Also, please do not squeeze the bottle because such pressure can overflow the mouth and could lead to the puppy or kitten aspirating the liquid into its lungs. If the puppy or kitten is sucking vigorously and not getting formula you may need to get a different nipple or possibly modify the nipple you are using. The hole in the nipple is the proper size if the bottle is

turned upside down and the formula drips out of the nipple with minimal pressure. If the puppy or kitten does not have an adequate suckle reflex, you may need to tube feed instead of bottle feed (separate handout).

Figure 1

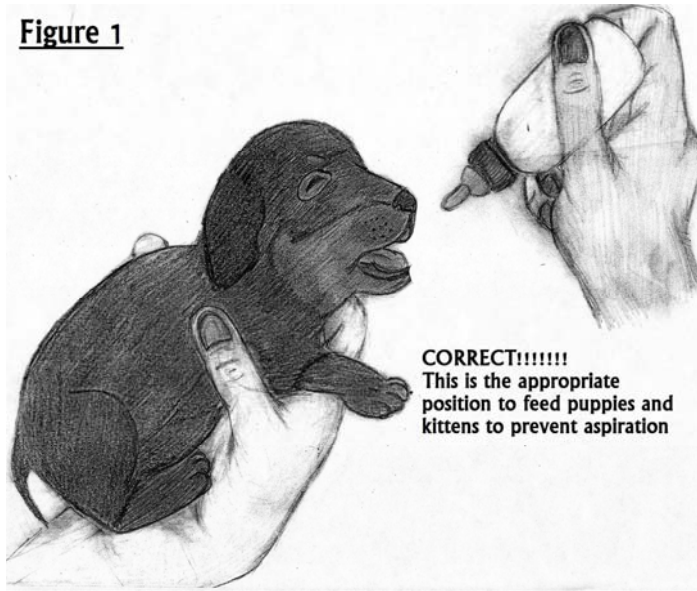
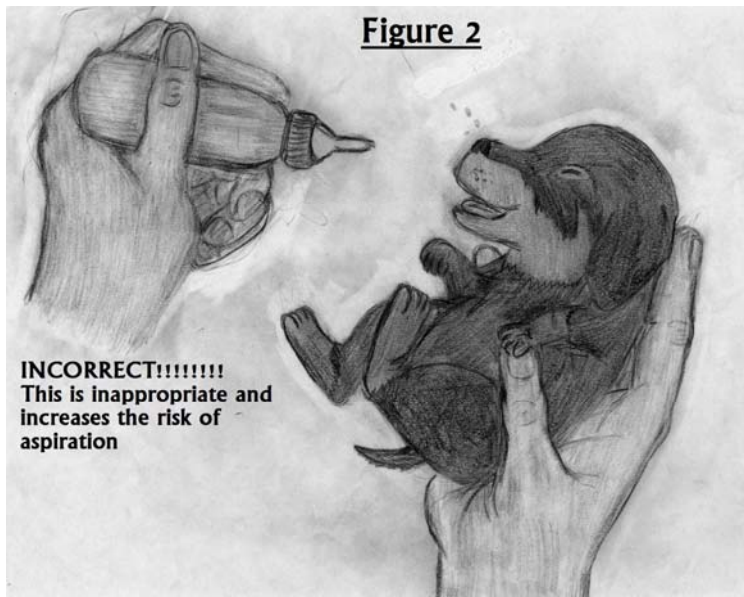


Figure 2



2. Transition Period or Infant Stage- this is the period from 14 to 28 days of age. The puppy or kitten develops sight, hearing, and will try more solid food (towards the end of the period). You can attempt to transition a puppy or kitten from formula to solid food (usually puppy or kitten canned food mixed with formula in a warm gruel) after approximately 21 days of age. The puppy or kitten will still need to be bottle fed during this period, but less often. Usually by five to six weeks of age, the puppy or kitten will be on solid food only.

3. Neonatal Emergencies - It is very important to recognize problems early and bring them to the attention of your veterinarian. Things to watch for include:

- a. Crying for longer than 20 minutes
- b. Limp, motionless puppy or kitten
- c. Lack of weight gain for more than 2 days
- d. Pale or grey gums rather than pink gums
- e. True diarrhea rather than a pasty stool
- f. Body temperature of below 95 degrees

We hope this helps. Good Luck.

Acknowledgements:

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References:

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Addendum 1 (Emergency Formula for Puppies)*

-4 ounces of cow or goat milk

-4 ounces of water

-2 egg yolks

-1 teaspoon of vegetable oil

-1000mg calcium carbonate

Addendum 2 (Emergency Formula for Kittens)*

-3 ounces of evaporated milk

-3 ounces of water

-3 ounces of lowfat yogurt

-3 egg yolks

*Bring the combination to a simmer and let cool. The emergency formula will be good for about 48 hours if refrigerated. Please bring to ~ 100 degrees Fahrenheit before giving to the puppy/kitten. Please discard any unused portion after 48 hours. If the formula has been left out of the refrigerator for more than 2 hours, it must be discarded.