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# FOSTER CARE ESSENTIALS FOR KITTENS

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Lifeline of Galveston County



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## Section 1: The Foster Experience

Thank you for participating in Lifeline of Galveston County kitten foster program! Our goal is to find loving, permanent homes for all our adoptable animals, and this program is an important step in that process. Under-aged kittens (less than 8 weeks old) make up the most fragile population in shelters. Yet, once they reach adoptable age, they become one of the easiest populations to find loving homes for!

### What can I foster?

Our kitten foster program is divided into age groups, each one needing specialized care:

- Bottle babies (0 days – 3 weeks old)
- Gruel babies (3 ½ weeks – 5 weeks old)
- Weaned kittens (5 weeks – 8+ weeks old)
- Moms & babies (care & time needed in foster depends on the age of the babies)

We also have foster opportunities for kittens with specific medical needs, including:

- Ringworm
- Upper respiratory infections
- Critical care

### What supplies do I need?

Many foster care supplies can be provided by Lifeline of Galveston County, but we greatly appreciate any help that you can offer in supplying items for the foster kittens. Here's what you'll need to help the foster kittens make a smooth transition to living in your home:

- Litter box & litter scooper
- Litter (non-clumping for young kittens)
- Towels or fleece blankets
- Bowls
- Toys & disposable scratching posts
- Transport carrier
- Scale
- Thermometer (including Vaseline)
- Nail trimmers
- Bleach (for disinfection)
- Bottles & formula (for bottle babies)
- Heating pad (for younger kittens)

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*Lifeline of Galveston County cannot reimburse you for supplies you purchase for foster animals.*

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## How much space do I need?

Kittens don't need much room – just a small area where they can explore and play. Often, a bathroom or small bedroom works perfectly. Remember that any area where you have foster kittens must be disinfected & cleaned afterward!

## How much time do I need?

It is recommended that fosters spend at least two hours per day with their kittens to make sure they are being socialized and their health monitored. But in reality, different age groups require different time commitments. For example, bottle babies are an around-the-clock experience. Weaned kittens require the least amount of time for basic care – but if they are sick, they may require more time, and typically need extra socialization.

You will want to consider your work & home schedules, and how flexible you are able to be before you begin fostering. In addition to basic care, fosters will need to set aside time for pick-up appointments, return appointments, as well as vaccine & medical appointments. In general, all kittens need:

- Feeding (dry food, wet food, water)
- Litterbox cleaning 1-2 times daily
- Monitoring for health & wellness (give medication if prescribed)
- Socialization and play!

Please let us know if you have any time or care restrictions and we will do our best to find the right match!

## How many can I foster?

As many as you'd like! Here are our general guidelines:

Numbers: Kittens that arrive as “singletons” must go to foster by themselves. We do not allow the mixing of litters (ie. we cannot send two singles to foster together, or add them to an existing group). Pairs and triplets will go to foster as a group. For larger litters of 4 or more, you must foster at least two kittens at a time (but are welcome to foster the entire group).

Moms with kittens: Moms with kittens will go to foster together, regardless of the litter size. Cats can have anywhere from 1-9 kittens per litter (but on average have 3-5 kittens). We do not separate moms from their kittens unless there is a medical or behavioral reason to do so. Once

the kittens are ready to return from foster and go up for adoption, their mom will also get spayed and be available for adoption.

Fostering with other rescues: We encourage our fosters to connect with additional rescue partners. However, while you are actively fostering with Lifeline of Galveston County, you may not foster kittens or cats from other rescues.

## Can I foster if I have pets at home?

Yes! However, please make sure your resident pets are up-to-date on vaccinations and healthy before taking home foster kittens.

Resident cats should always be kept separate from foster kittens, as there is the risk of disease transmission. While most viruses are species-specific and cannot be transmitted to other types of animals & people, certain parasites (fleas, ringworm, etc.) *can be transmitted between species*. Use caution if introducing your foster kittens to other pets. Lifeline of Galveston County cannot provide medical care for owned pets & their owners. Any supervised interactions between foster animals and resident pets are done at your own risk.

## Section 2: Type of kittens & basic care

### Types of foster kittens

This table provides a general overview of the different types of kittens based on age and the basic care required. More detailed care information can be found in this section, below the table.

	Age	Time needed in foster	Basic care requirements
<b><u>Bottle babies</u></b>	0 days – 3 weeks	5 – 8+ weeks, depending on size & health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bottle feeding every 2-3 hours (around the clock)</li><li>• Bowel &amp; urine expression</li><li>• Extra close monitoring health</li><li>• Help transition into gruel baby and then weaned kitten stages</li></ul>
<b><u>Gruel babies</u></b>	3 ½ weeks – 5 weeks old	3 – 5 weeks, depending on size & health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Helping kittens eat every 4-6 hours</li><li>• Cleaning, socializing, and monitoring health</li></ul>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developing good litterbox habits (may still need to be stimulated).</li> </ul>
<b><u>Weaned kittens</u></b>	5 weeks – 8+ weeks	1 – 3 weeks, depending on size & health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Putting down food 3+ times during the day</li> <li>Cleaning, socializing, and monitoring health</li> <li>Developing good litterbox habits</li> </ul>
<b><u>Nursing mom with litters</u></b>	kittens can be anywhere from 0 days – 7 weeks old	depends on age of kittens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Putting down food 3+ times during the day</li> <li>Cleaning and socializing kittens</li> <li>Monitoring kittens as they transition between stages (nursing/gruel/weaned)</li> </ul>

### **Surgery-deferred kittens**

We have additional opportunities to foster older kittens in need of specialized care. These kittens are unable to be spayed/neutered for a variety of reasons, but typically are undergoing treatment for conditions such as: chronic upper respiratory infection, ringworm, etc.

### ***A quick note on FIV & FeLV***

*Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) and Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) are two viruses that can sometimes be present in our kittens (typically around 2% of the general kitten population). We do not test our moms and kittens for these viruses prior to going into foster care. Mom cats will be tested for these viruses at the time of spay surgery but can be tested before going into foster care upon request, if there is available medical staff. However, we will not test kittens under 4 months of age due to the unreliability of the test for young kittens. Therefore, it is recommended to keep foster kittens separate from resident cats (see: Section 3).*

## **Basic Care of foster kittens**

### **Care for bottle babies**

Bottle babies should be fed every 2-3 hours. It is normal for a bottle kitten to be “fussy” every now and then, and if it refuses to drink you may wait and try again at the next scheduled feeding. If a bottle kitten skips several meals, or has not eaten in 8 hours, please call the emergency hotline.

### **STEP 1: Mix the formula**

- KMR formula should be mixed according to can instructions (2 parts water to 1 part formula). Mix well.
- For the first couple feedings, dilute the formula (3 parts water to 1 part formula) to help reduce digestive upset.
- Only mix what you think the kitten will drink that day. Leftover formula should be immediately refrigerated. It can be kept up to 24 hours once mixed. Unused mixed formula should be discarded after 24 hours. (Tip: write the date/time of mixing on the container.) The opened can of powdered formula should also be refrigerated.

### **STEP 2: Prepare the bottle**

- Estimate required amount of formula in clean bottle (stomach capacity of kittens is generally 4mL per 100g of body weight).
- Heat water in a mug or container (a microwave works well) and place cold bottle in hot water for a few minutes.
- Test temperature of formula on wrist. If too cool, return it to hot water. If too hot, swirl formula around in bottle and wait 30 seconds and test again. Formula should be warm to the touch, but not hot.
- Test the nipple. Formula should slowly drip from tip when bottle is upside down, and should not be streaming.

### **STEP 3: Prepare the kitten**

- Kitten should be warm before feeding. If extremities feel cool, slowly warm the kitten before continuing.
- Kitten should be fed on its stomach, with its head tilted slightly up with neck extended, similar to its position when nursing from mom. (Tip: Never feed a kitten on its back as this can cause formula to enter the lungs!) You can “burrito” the kitten in a towel if needed.
- Burp the kitten by gently patting or rubbing its back.
- If you notice any formula coming out of the kitten’s nose, stop immediately. This can be a sign of overfeeding or that the formula is streaming too quickly from the nipple.

### **STEP 4: Stimulate the kitten**

- Use a warm damp cotton ball or paper towel and gently rub the kitten’s genitals to stimulate it to urinate and defecate. Kittens will not defecate every time (usually 1-3 times per day).
- Continue stimulating for 30 seconds after kitten stops urinating to make sure bladder is empty and to give the kitten a chance to defecate.

### **STEP 5: Clean up after feeding**



- If bottle is empty or if it has been 24 hours since the leftover formula was mixed, clean it out with warm soapy water and let it dry between feedings.

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*Remember – feeding smaller amounts more frequently is better for kittens, as it will help to keep them hydrated and prevent issues associated with overfeeding.*

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## Care for gruel babies

Some kittens take to canned food quickly and hungrily, while others may cling to the bottle. There is no harm in continuing to bottle feed, but remember that kittens must be fully eating on their own to be considered adoption ready (8 weeks old). Kittens that have already been transitioned to gruel before going to foster should not be given any formula unless directed to by a Lifeline of Galveston County team member. Some important tips to be aware of:

- **Gruel babies should be fed every 4-6 hours.**
- Kittens are ready to eat canned cat food beginning at 3.5 weeks, or when teeth emerge.
- Gruel babies should also be provided fresh water at all times.

Older kittens who nurse must be supervised carefully for chewing the bottle. If chewing occurs, you must stop bottle feeding immediately, or else the kitten could swallow part or all the rubber nipple and develop an obstruction.

### STEP 1: Mix the gruel

- Add warm water to canned cat food until it reaches a pudding-like consistency.
- Kittens may prefer different consistencies, so you are welcome to experiment with their preferences.
- If the kitten is struggling to enjoy gruel, you may add some KMR formula to the gruel, but leftovers must be discarded immediately after feeding time, as it spoils quickly.
- Leftover canned food can be covered and refrigerated for up to 48 hours.

### STEP 2: Teaching kittens to eat

- Take a small dab of warm gruel onto your finger and place it on the kitten's tongue or lips. You may alternatively use a small spoon or syringe.
- Encourage the kitten to eat from the bowl as much as possible. It may take several days to a couple weeks for the kitten to decide that the gruel is edible. Until then, continue to assist eating.
- Kittens may enjoy any flavor of food. In fact, getting them used to a variety of proteins and flavors is beneficial. However, limit the amount of fish & seafood you give, as it is a harder protein to digest and may cause diarrhea. If a kitten refuses to eat the food provided to you, please notify Lifeline of Galveston County.

### **STEP 3: Litterbox training**

- At this age, kittens should begin urinating & defecating on their own. If you notice urine & feces consistently in your foster area, it is a good indication that your kittens do not need to be manually expressed.
- Put down a small litterbox filled with non-clumping clay litter. It is a good idea to have one litterbox for every two kittens.
- Kittens typically take to the litterboxes on their own, but they may have “accidents” for several weeks. Don’t worry! They should get the hang of things soon. If one or more kitten is struggling to use the litterbox, there are additional steps you can take (see: Section 4).

### **Care for weaned kittens**

Weaned kittens are fully eating on their own (without assistance). They still need to be fed several times daily and may require assistance eating if they become sick or congested. Some important tips to be aware of:

- Always have fresh water and dry food available.
- Feed gruel/wet food 3-4 times throughout the day. Kittens may eat as much as they want!
- Litterboxes must be cleaned 1-2 times daily.
- Weaned kittens should also be socialized to get them ready for adoption.

### **Care for nursing moms with litters**

Having a mom with kittens can be a wonderful experience! She will help transition them from nursing to eating canned food, groom them, and help to socialize them. Some important tips to be aware of:

- You will want to provide mom with a nice warm, quiet area where she can relax.
- She can be allowed time away from her kittens, but for kittens under 4 weeks, should spend the majority of her time with them.

Once kittens are weaned, she may start to spend less and less time with them. Even though mom cats do most of the work, you will want to keep a close eye on the weight & health of her kittens and be prepared to intervene if the mom cat is not taking good care of them.

### **Taking care of large litters**

When fostering larger groups of kittens (4 or more), it is important to put down extra resources, including: litterboxes, food bowls, water bowls, and toys! The general rule is to have one food bowl, one water bowl, and one litterbox for *every two kittens* in a litter. Otherwise, kittens may hoard resources from each other. If you notice one or more kitten is smaller, skinnier, or does not eat while their siblings are eating, you may need to separate them and give extra food and attention.

While it is natural for kittens to rough-house, wrestle, and play with each other, if you notice a kitten is being bullied by or is bullying its siblings, please notify a Lifeline of Galveston County team member. We may choose to separate larger litters if such issues arise.

It is also important to keep a close eye on the health of larger litters. If one or more kitten is having diarrhea, vomiting, or any other symptoms of illness, it is helpful for our team to know exactly which kittens require treatment.

## Additional care information

### Keeping kittens warm

It is important that kittens have a warm environment, as they cannot maintain their internal body temperatures until they are older. Here is a useful chart for determining how warm you should keep your foster kittens\*:

Age of Kitten	Internal Body Temp	Environmental Temp
0-1 week	95-99° F	85-90° F
2-3 weeks	97-100° F	79-84° F
4+ weeks	99-101° F	73.5-79° F

*\*Information taken from the "Orphaned Kittens Temperature Chart" at Maddie's Fund (<http://www.maddiesfund.org>)*

You may also add environmental heat by providing a heat source, such as one of the following:

- Electric Heating Pad – a flat pad that provides constant, consistent heat. Monitor and stop using if kittens try to chew on the cord.
- Snuggle Safe – a reusable, microwavable disc. This heat source lasts 8-10 hours.
- Rice Socks – fill a clean sock with dry rice and tie the end of the sock. Microwave for about 3 minutes. This heat source should last 2-3 hours.
- If using a heat source, make sure you provide enough room in the foster space for kittens to move off of the heat source if they become too warm.

### Grooming & bathing

Kittens can be messy, but "less is more" is the general rule when it comes to cleaning them. Over-bathed kittens can develop dry skin or become cold if not dried properly. Here are the levels of cleaning (depending on how messy the kitten is!)

#### *Bathing*

- Spot cleaning – use a baby or pet wipe, or a warm damp cloth and gently wipe the mess. For kittens with food stuck to their face, only use a warm damp cloth
- Half bath – fill a bowl or sink with 1-2 inches of warm water. Only bathe the messy part of the kitten (such as its rear end). If needed, use baby or pet shampoo, or Dawn dish

soap. Use a cup to scoop water and gently rinse off any soap. Thoroughly dry the wet parts of the kitten with a towel and/or blow drier on low until the fur is completely dry.

- Full bath – if the kitten needs a more thorough bath, make sure you do not get water on its head, especially the eyes, nose, and ears!

### *Trimming nails*

Kittens have small, needle-like nails that can retract into their paws. Getting kittens used to nail trimming while they are young will make them much easier to handle as adults. Start this training when the kitten is cuddling or sleeping. Gently massage all four paws and practice pressing down on the pad of each toe to reveal the nail. Don't forget the dewclaw on each front paw. If the kitten pulls away its paw or starts to squirm, stop and try again later.

Once the kitten is comfortable having its paws massaged, you can begin to trim the nails. Use a cat-specific nail trimmer, or small human nail trimmer. Only trim one or two nails at a time; stop before the kitten gets annoyed or wriggly! Trim conservatively at first – remember, the goal is to get them used to the sensation of nail trimming, so it is better to trim only a little bit and avoid cutting the nails too short (which can hurt). There is a small blood vessel called the “quick” in the middle of each nail. You want to trim before the blood vessel starts. If you cannot see the quick, which can be tricky to do with kittens' tiny nails, aim for trimming the most curved part of the nail.

If you do accidentally cause a nail to bleed, do not panic! You can stop the bleeding by tapping some flour, corn starch, baking soda, or styptic powder onto the end of the nail. If bleeding continues for more than a few minutes, contact the foster coordinator for guidance.

### **Vaccines**

Beginning as early as 4 weeks of age, kittens will be vaccinated with an FVRCP booster. Mom cats from our nursery are fully vaccinated (FVRCP & rabies).

- FVRCP – This vaccine protects against three main feline-specific viruses (feline rhinotracheitis, calici, and panleukopenia). Kittens can receive this vaccine beginning at 4 weeks of age, and will be given a booster every two weeks to four weeks. *Because neonatal kittens have fragile immune systems and come from a shelter-type environment, they may end up contracting one or more of these viruses despite their vaccination status (see: Section 3).*
- Rabies – This vaccine protects against the rabies virus (a zoonotic virus), and is required by state law. It will be given to any cat or dog over 3 months of age.
- Other vaccines – Additional vaccines for cats exist but are less common and not required. Lifeline of Galveston County does not vaccinate against FIV or FeLV (see: Section 3), as the effectiveness of these vaccines are not proven and require a blood test before administering. They will also cause the cat to test positive for these viruses in the future, which could result in inaccurate medical diagnosis.

## Cleaning between litters

It is recommended to thoroughly clean all foster areas before taking in new litters. Even if your foster kittens remained healthy for the duration of their visit, they may have been carriers of viral illnesses that could infect new groups coming into your home.

- Sweep/mop/vacuum all areas and disinfect with bleach (1:10 ratio).
- All reusable kitten items (such as beds, blankets, toys, etc.) should either be washed or sprayed with bleach before being used for a new litter.
- If any of your foster kittens were ill with a viral infection (such as calicivirus or panleukopenia), additional cleaning steps may be required.

## Section 3: Medical Concerns

### What to expect

Many kittens will end up on medication at some point during kittenhood. It is the reality of working with thousands of animals each year. Think of an animal shelter as being like a school or hospital—there are a lot of germs floating around, no matter how clean and careful we are. We also do not know exactly where these kittens originated from or what they may have been exposed to before coming into our care. Most of the time, if kittens are given medical attention as soon as symptoms start, they quickly get better and go on to be healthy, happy cats. Some kittens may naturally be more prone to illness than others or may take longer to recover.

### Basic medical concerns

#### Appetite & energy

No matter what age your foster kittens are, **appetite** and **energy** are the two most important things to keep track of. A lack of interest in food, or a lack of (or drop in) energy can indicate a serious medical issue, even if no other symptoms are present. Kittens that do not eat for more than 12 hours (or bottle babies that do not eat for more than 8 hours) are at serious risk for hypoglycemia and death.

**If you notice a change in your kitten's eating or playing habits, or they seem "off"—DON'T WAIT! Notify Lifeline of Galveston County immediately.**

#### Upper Respiratory Infection (URI)

Upper respiratory infections of viral origin are often associated with stressful events including being in a shelter environment or going to a new home. If a cat is sick enough to stop eating or drinking, hospitalization may be needed. A kitten can get dehydrated from the fluid lost in copious nasal discharge. Painful ulcers can form on the eyes, nose or in the mouth. Sometimes fever is high enough to warrant monitoring. In young kittens, pneumonia may result from what

started as an upper respiratory infection. Symptoms include: sneezing, nasal discharge, runny eyes, cough, poor appetite, decreased energy.

<b>When to contact Lifeline of Galveston County</b>	If there is a decrease in appetite and/or energy.  If a kitten's eyes are getting "stuck shut" with goopy discharge, or if there is persistent nasal discharge (especially if whitish, yellowish, or greenish).
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## **Home care**

How to clean eyes and/or nose:

- Use warm/damp compress (washcloth) and hold over goopy areas. Gently wipe nose to remove crusty/goopy material. Gently wipe eyes (from close to nose outwards towards ears) to remove crusty/goopy material.
- Clean eyes before giving eye medications (if prescribed).
- Eyes and nose can have warm compresses applied several times per day.

Use of steam (hot shower, humidifier, etc.):

- If kittens are congested, you can expose them to steam/humidity to help open up clogged breathing.
- For hot shower system: run hot shower water in a small, enclosed bathroom (door shut, ventilation fan off). Let kitten sit in bathroom for 15 minutes of steam therapy.
- For humidifier system: set up humidifier in small, poorly vented area. Let kitten sit in area for 15 minutes. You can also run the humidifier in the designated kitten area for 15 minutes every several hours. Too much exposure to humidifiers can get kittens wet.

Supplemental feeding:

- Spoon-feeding kittens: mix up gruel (see: Section 2). Use the handle of a spoon and place small mouthfuls of gruel in kitten's mouth.
- This is a messy procedure, but can help kittens remember that gruel is delicious. Persistence with small bites is more effective than giant bites.
- Please keep in mind that kittens needing supplemental feeding are frequently congested and may need their noses cleaned before and after each feeding.

## **Limping**

While limping can sometimes be caused by injury (such as jumping off a high counter), the most common cause of limping in a kitten is fever. If you notice your kitten is limping, place the kitten in a carrier for 15-20 minutes to rest. If the kitten continues to limp after that time, sign up for a sick animal vet check appointment online.

<b>When to contact Lifeline of Galveston County</b>	If the kitten continues to limp after given a rest period in a carrier for 15-20 minutes.
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## Diarrhea

Many things can cause diarrhea in a kitten. Often, a simple diet change or move to a new environment will result in soft stool for 1-2 days. However, diarrhea can also be the sign of a viral, bacterial, or parasitic infection. Diarrhea can cause dehydration and weight loss, so it is important to treat this symptom in a timely manner.

<b>When to contact Lifeline of Galveston County</b>	<p>If a kitten has liquid/jelly stool several times over 24 hours</p> <p>If they have pudding-like stool several times lasting more than 48 hours</p> <p>If stool is not improving after being in foster care &amp; on a consistent diet for over 3 days.</p>
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## Home care

General supportive care

- Supervise eating and drinking habits. Spoon-feed wet food and/or keep kitten at food dish longer (can feed separately from littermates to better monitor). Clear Pedialyte can be given to support hydration.
- Add 1 tablespoon canned plain pumpkin and/or plain yogurt to wet food.

Before vet check

- During the first 48 hours of foster experience, monitor stool. A change in environment and/or food change can cause loose stool. Also monitor energy and appetite.
- After 3+ days in foster care, if the stool still loose (not improving), contact Lifeline of Galveston County. If the stool is improving (but still loose), continue to monitor for appetite/energy decreases.

After vet check

- Always give prescribed medications as directed by Lifeline of Galveston County authorized veterinarian. Monitor the kitten's appetite/energy and alert the foster team if it has decreased.
- After the treatment concludes, alert the foster team if the diarrhea has not improved or if it returns.
- Contact Lifeline of Galveston County immediately if there is a significant decrease in appetite and/or energy, if the kitten is unable to walk normally or is wobbly or limp, or if the diarrhea becomes significantly looser (goes from pudding to liquid).

## Vomiting

Vomiting can be the result of a change in diet or move to a new environment. However, if it continues for more than 24 hours, happens multiple times in one day, or is accompanied by any other symptoms, please notify the foster coordinator.

<b>When to contact Lifeline of Galveston County</b>	If it continues for more than 24 hours, happens multiple times in one day, or is accompanied by any other symptoms.
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## Parasites & other zoonotic concerns

While most viruses are species-specific (can only be transmitted between cats), parasites are typically **zoonotic** and can pass between foster kittens and other animals, including people. Luckily, most parasites are easy to treat!

If you suspect your foster kitten(s) need treatment for parasites, please notify Lifeline of Galveston County. ***Do not treat these conditions on your own!***

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*Many store-bought medications and ointments are not as effective as the medications our vets can prescribe. Never use medication or ointments meant for human use on your foster kittens.*

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### Fleas

Live fleas look like small, brown bugs that move very quickly through the fur. Flea “dirt” looks like coffee grounds, and could indicate that a kitten has fleas (or was recently treated for fleas). Fleas can cause anemia, bacterial infections, and hair loss. For very young kittens (under 4 weeks old), fleas are best treated with a bath and flea comb (see: Section 2). Kittens over 4 weeks old can be treated with a topical medication.

### Ear mites

Ear mites look like coffee grounds and are seen in the cat’s ear canal. They typically cause excessive itching and/or irritation of the ears. Ear mites are treated with a topical medication.

### Roundworms

Roundworms look like 4” pieces of spaghetti and are found in a kitten’s feces. They are transmitted by swallowing infected fleas or from an infected mother’s milk. Side effects may include: bloating, excessive eating without gaining weight.

### Tapeworms

Tapeworms look like small grains of white or yellow rice and are found in a kitten’s feces, or dried around its anus. They are transmitted by swallowing infected fleas (or occasionally, rodents). Tapeworms typically appear 2-3 weeks post-ingestion. Side effects may include: vomiting, weight loss, difficulty gaining weight.



## *Ringworm (zoonotic)*

Ringworm is not actually a worm! It is a fungus that causes a rash, skin irritation, and circular patches of hair loss. Ringworm thrives in dark, moist environments. It is particularly visible under black light, where most ringworm spores shine bright green. Ringworm requires specialized treatment, so notify Lifeline of Galveston County if you see anything suspicious! It is highly recommended to wear gloves when handling ringworm-positive animals.

## Common viruses and health conditions

### Calici Virus

Calici virus is one of the more common causes of an upper respiratory infection in cats. The severity of the infection can vary widely. While not usually fatal in otherwise healthy kittens, it often requires supportive care once symptoms begin. Painful oral ulcers can cause an infected cat to stop eating and a high fever can lead to dehydration. Symptoms often include: sneezing, conjunctivitis, oral/nasal ulcers, lack of appetite, fever, lethargy, limping, swelling of extremities.

### Feline Rhinotracheitis Virus (Feline Herpes)

Feline Herpes virus is also one of the more common causes of an upper respiratory infection in cats, with a particular focus on inflammation of the conjunctiva (eyes). Similar to calici virus, the severity of the infection can vary widely. Cats of any age can contract feline herpes (the majority of cats who have ever lived in a shelter environment have been exposed to the virus). If left untreated, cats can develop eye infections and damage to their corneas. Symptoms often include: conjunctivitis, sneezing, corneal ulcers, persistent watery eyes.

### Panleukopenia Virus

Feline distemper, a parvovirus, is a life-threatening disease. The infection is highly contagious among unvaccinated cats, which are usually kittens and young adult cats living in groups. Mortality of untreated sick cats is typically considered to be 90%. Infected kittens showing clinical signs require aggressive treatment and hospitalization. Symptoms often include: lethargy, vomiting, diarrhea, and appetite loss. Some kittens may not show symptoms prior to death.

### Fading Kitten Syndrome

Fading kitten syndrome describes a kitten that “crashes”—it suddenly becomes ill or unresponsive, even if it was previously healthy. While many things can cause fading kitten syndrome, the two most common are **hypothermia** (being cold) and **hypoglycemia** (low blood sugar). There could also be other underlying issues, such as congenital defects, disease, etc. that may not be treatable. While there is no guarantee that a fading kitten will survive even with immediate medical intervention, following the emergency protocol could save its life!

## **Hypoglycemia**

Most instances of hypoglycemia in kittens are the result of inadequate nutrition; either not enough or poor quality (indigestible) food. Excessive exercise, cold environmental temperatures, and infections may also cause the body to use up more sugar than is available. Hypoglycemia may also be secondary to other diseases such as infections. If you suspect your kitten is having an episode, it is imperative to immediately provide a source of sugar (see: Section 3).

## **Other medical considerations**

### **Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV)**

FIV is an immune-compromising virus. It is typically transmitted between cats via deep bite wounds, sexual intercourse, or in utero from mother to kitten. While FIV itself does not require treatment, it can result in a cat being more susceptible to secondary illnesses such as upper respiratory infections, ringworm, and dental disease.

### **Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV)**

FeLV is an immune-compromising virus that targets a cat's bone marrow. It is typically spread via saliva, so it is recommended that FeLV positive cats are housed separately from non-FeLV cats, as there is a risk of transmission from shared food and water bowls. Cats with FeLV are significantly more susceptible to secondary illnesses such as upper respiratory infections, FIP, lymphoma, and bone marrow disease. FeLV-positive cats tend to have shorter lives than non-FeLV cats, especially if they contract the virus during kittenhood. However, with proactive veterinary care, FeLV-positive cats can still enjoy a good quality of life.

### **Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP)**

FIP is viral disease that is caused by a mutation of, or poor immune response to, the coronavirus. Only about 5-10% of cats infected with the coronavirus will go on to develop clinical FIP. This disease mostly affects kittens, cats with weakened immune systems, or geriatric cats. Unfortunately, FIP is a fatal illness and cats who develop this disease should be closely monitored for quality of life. Symptoms may vary but can include: weight loss, depression, anemia, loss of appetite, rough hair coat, and buildup of fluid in the abdomen.

### **Congenital defects**

Kittens can also be born with issues that may impact their ability to thrive. It is one reason why cats have such large litters. Mother cats will sometimes neglect or abandon kittens that she deems unlikely to survive. That does not mean it isn't worthwhile to give these fragile kittens a chance! However, it is important to understand that even with the best care and medical intervention, not all kittens who enter into our care will make it to adoptable age.

## Failure to thrive

Cats have large litters of kittens (and often) for a reason. Not all kittens survive to adulthood, especially out in nature. At Lifeline of Galveston County, we do our best to give each and every kitten that comes into our care the greatest chance of thriving and being adopted into a home. That being said, we cannot control the outcome of every kitten, which includes kittens that go into foster care. It is important to remember that every kitten you foster saves the life of another kitten in need of rescue!

## Medical emergencies

### What is considered an emergency?

1. If the animal is weak, wobbly, or unable to stand up.
2. If the animal has completely liquid diarrhea. Soft stool (pudding-like consistency) is not an emergency, but if it persists for more than two days, sign up for a sick animal appointment at [volunteers.bestfriends.org](http://volunteers.bestfriends.org)
3. If the animal is severely dehydrated. To test for dehydration, pinch the skin at the back of the neck and let go. If the skin does not go down and looks like a "shark's fin", this is a sign of dehydration. Another way to test for dehydration is if the gums feel "sticky".
4. If the animal is having labored breathing.
5. If the animal is actively bleeding or has experienced trauma (puncture wounds, limp, unconscious, etc.)
6. If the animal is continuously vomiting.
7. Any other concern that requires immediate medical attention. Immediate medical attention is needed when the animal cannot remain in a stable condition until business hours (or if during business hours, cannot remain in a stable condition until the next available sick animal appointment).
8. If the animal is exhibiting extreme behavioral concerns that puts another animal or person at risk for or has resulted in bites or severe injury.
9. If the animal becomes lost or is running loose in an unsecured area (such as, the street).

### Protocol for sick or fading kittens

If your foster kitten is showing any symptoms of "fading kitten syndrome" (hypothermia, lethargy, labored breathing, excessive meowing), **DON'T WAIT!** Follow these steps:

1. Provide warmth—wrap the kitten in a blanket or towel with a heat source.
  - a. Make sure the heat source is not directly touching the kitten, but is covered by a cloth or blanket.
  - b. Don't have a heat source? Put uncooked rice into a clean sock, knot the end, and microwave for 2-3 minutes.
  - c. No microwave? Put hot (not boiling) water into a doubled-up Ziploc bag.

2. Increase blood sugar—use light Karo corn syrup or mix some sugar into warm water until it dissolves. Use a syringe or finger to place a few drops of sugar source into the kitten's mouth **every 3 minutes**.
  - a. Using a stopwatch or timer can help!
  - b. If the kitten cannot swallow, rub the sugar source onto its gums.
3. Contact Lifeline of Galveston County immediately—calmly tell us your name, the name of the kitten, and what you are currently doing to help the kitten. We will together determine if any additional steps are needed.

If the kitten has not begun to improve within 15 minutes, their chance of survival is very low, but in some cases we may be able to provide more specialized emergency care. If the kitten does not pull through, please remember that you have done everything you can, and that the kitten could have other underlying, non-treatable issues.

## Disinfecting and protecting your pets

### *When to disinfect*

While it is a good idea to thoroughly clean foster areas between litters, “deep cleans” should always be completed in the following circumstances:

- If one or more kitten tested positive for panleukopenia
- If one or more kitten died in your home, or upon returning to the shelter—unless an obvious non-viral cause of death was confirmed by a veterinarian
- If one or more kitten is suspected to have had or been exposed to a contagious viral infection, such as panleukopenia or calici virus

### *How to disinfect the foster area*

1. Sweep/mop/vacuum (depending on surface) area to remove loose organic material.
2. Thoroughly scrub (using soap/detergent) areas.
3. Treat all hard surfaces with diluted bleach solution (1/2 cup bleach per gallon water). Allow to dry overnight. Repeat.

### *What to do with foster items*

1. Discard all disposable items (such as leftover dry food, litter, cardboard litterboxes,).
2. Discard anything that cannot be washed, soaked, or steamed (such as plastic litterboxes, scratching posts, and wand toys) as these items cannot be reliably disinfected.
3. Wash all reusable items (toys, blankets, beds, etc.) in washing machine with bleach. Repeat. You may choose to discard these items instead.
4. For carpet and carpeted cat trees, clean using a steam cleaner that reaches at least 200 degrees Fahrenheit.

5. Unopened cans of wet food can be returned to Lifeline of Galveston County.

## Viruses & resident pets

Resident cats that are up-to-date on vaccinations should remain healthy, even if they were exposed to the virus. Panleukopenia, along with many other feline viruses, is commonly found in the natural environment and many cats build up immunity to these viruses on their own. Modern vaccines also work well to protect your cats. Cats most at risk for transmission include: kittens, unvaccinated adults, elderly/senior cats.

As an extra precaution, be sure to monitor your cats' eating and litterbox habits for the next two weeks and consult a veterinarian if you notice any of the following symptoms:

- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Lack of appetite
- Decreased energy/lethargy
- Ulcers, particularly around the nose or mouth

## Visiting your personal veterinarian

Lifeline of Galveston County will provide necessary medical care for your foster animals. However, you may choose to take your foster kitten(s) to your own veterinarian for treatment *at your own expense*. **We are unable to reimburse you for any unauthorized treatments.** You will also be required to submit a copy of outside medical treatment to Lifeline of Galveston County within 24 hours for our records.

# Section 4: Socialization and kitten behavior

## Socializing your foster kitten

Our goal is to develop friendly, confident kittens who will thrive in any adoptive home. While some kittens may naturally be more shy, or have come into our care under-socialized, there are plenty of ways to increase their sociability while in foster. All kittens will benefit from the following exposure:

### Noise

A calm, quiet environment is a wonderful and relaxing place for kittens. It is also important to get them used to common noises they may hear in a noisier household (such as the vacuum, laundry, music, etc.). Start with low volume noises at a distance (for example, turn the vacuum on in another room) for 5-10 minutes. Observe the kittens' behavior. If they are acting shy or get startled easily, reduce the volume and/or distance. If the kittens are relaxed, slowly increase the volume and frequency. Talk radio can also be a great way for kittens to get accustomed to common noises.

## Terrain

Have novelty items that kittens can climb, explore, and play on. You can use cat trees, scratching posts, and plenty of cat toys. You can also use cheaper items like cardboard boxes of various sizes, bubble wrap, and paper towel rolls. Just be sure all items are “kitten proof” and do not present a choking hazard. Change out or re-arrange these items daily to keep things new and interesting!

## People & animals

Host kitten parties and invite your friends and family over to play with the kittens. Just be sure everyone washes their hands before and after (especially if they have cats at home). If you have a cat-friendly dog, this can be a wonderful opportunity to expose your foster kittens to dogs (under strict supervision).

## Play

A confident cat is a confident hunter. Play time is essential! The best type of play is interactive, so be sure to spend at least 15 minutes twice a day playing with your foster kittens. If the kittens are extremely active, make sure they also take breaks to rest and eat, as kittens who overexert themselves are at risk for hypoglycemia.

## Shy/fearful kittens

Under-socialized kittens should be housed in smaller spaces that minimize hiding opportunities. Avoid spaces with areas you cannot easily access (i.e. under beds, behind furniture, etc.). You can create easy-to-reach hiding spots by setting up cardboard boxes or other open containers. If you do not have a suitable area, contact the foster department to borrow a crate.

- **Handling:** Kittens should be handled for many brief sessions each day. Use a small towel or blanket to safely pick up the kitten. This will make the kitten feel more comfortable while also protecting your hands from any bites or scratches. “Burrito wrap” the kitten and hold it gently but firmly in your arms. Ignore any hissing or growling. With one finger, gently pet the kitten on its nose, chin, or cheeks. Once the kitten has remained calm in your arms for a couple minutes, you can release it. If you are working with multiple shy kittens, handle each kitten separately.
- **Toys:** Sit as close as the kitten will allow without running away. Use a wand toy (or a shoelace can work well), to entice the kitten to play. It is okay if the kitten does not play at first. Even watching the toy move around is a good first step! Once the kitten starts swatting at and chasing the toy, use the toy to guide the kitten into the open and move across the floor. Never leave string-based toys or shoelaces unattended with foster kittens.
- **Food & treats:** Use tasty treats or food to encourage shy kittens to approach you. Human baby food (chicken; without onion) can be useful if the kitten does not respond

to regular cat food. Put a dab on your finger or a spoon and have the kitten lick it off. Slowly, lure the kitten closer and closer to you before giving it the reward.

## Common kitten behavior challenges

### Kittens that bite

Kittens between 4-8 weeks old are developing their hunting skills, which include running, jumping, pouncing, and even biting. Playtime between siblings will often help kittens develop good social habits. However, for single kittens and kittens that play too rough, it may result in these behaviors being inappropriately directed onto people.

Here are some techniques for working with kittens that play-bite:

- Play dead: Kittens are looking for your hand or arm (or feet) to move away when it attacks! Instead, make your limb go limp and do not move it. Pretty soon the kitten will realize that your hand is boring and not reacting like prey. When the kitten disengages, redirect its play onto an appropriate toy. *Never use your hand, arms, or feet to play with your foster kitten, even if they are gentle! This will only encourage biting and can result in behavioral issues as an adult cat.*
- Say "Ouch!": If a kitten bites particularly hard, give a high-pitched (but not too loud) squeal to communicate that it hurts. This is what sibling kittens do when they wrestle each other. Once the kitten disengages, redirect its play onto an appropriate toy.
- Keep toys handy: For kittens who like to ambush you in hallways, doorways, or whenever you are walking around, keep toys stashed strategically around the house where these play "attacks" take place. Before the kitten runs toward you, distract them with a toy so that you have a clear walking path. This will eventually reinforce the idea that hunting is for toys, not ankles!

If you have gone through the above suggestions but are still struggling with your kitten's rough play, please contact Lifeline of Galveston County for additional guidance.

### Litterbox trouble-shooting

Most cats take to using a litterbox naturally and don't need much guidance. There may still be accidents while they are learning, but most kittens use the litterbox consistently by 6 weeks old. If your foster kitten is over 6 weeks old and is urinating or defecating outside of the litterbox, follow these steps:

- Add more boxes: Some cats like one box for urine and a separate box for feces. Ideally, these boxes should not be next to each other but on opposite sides of a room, or in separate rooms. Litterboxes should be placed in a significant area (i.e. where your kitten spends a lot of time), but not in a high-trafficked area (such as a doorway) where people or other animals often walk by. If you are fostering multiple kittens, make sure you have at least one litterbox box for every two kittens.

- Keep it clean: Just as we don't like dirty bathrooms, neither does your kitten. Be sure to scoop each litterbox 1-2 times daily. You do not need to discard all of the litter unless it is particularly dirty. There should be just enough litter to cover the bottom of the box (about ½ inch).
- Move the bedding: If the kitten is urinating on bedding located next to the litterbox, remove it. Alternatively, if the kitten is urinating on bedding and there is no litterbox nearby, try adding an additional box to that area (but not immediately next to the bedding).
- Confine the kitten: Keep the kitten in a smaller area (such as a bathroom or large crate) to see if it will use the litterbox appropriately. Some kittens simply get distracted in larger spaces! If the kitten does use the litterbox consistently, you can begin to increase the amount of space and distance from the litterbox.

If you have gone through the above suggestions but are still struggling with your kitten's litterbox habits, please contact Lifeline of Galveston County for additional guidance.

### **Kittens that Suckle**

Kittens that do not have a mom cat will sometimes develop the habit of suckling on their siblings. While this behavior in and of itself is harmless, it can cause sores and infections on the kittens being suckled. In particular, suckling of the genitals is a serious problem and should be stopped immediately, or it may lead to swelling, urethral blockage, or even necrosis of the penile tissue.

A suckling kitten should be separated from its siblings for 2-3 days and given smaller portions of food more frequently. This will often resolve the behavior. However, if it continues, please contact Lifeline of Galveston County. **Kittens that have been suckled on may require medical treatment.**

### **Moms & kittens**

Mom cats may react differently to people or other animals while taking care of their kittens, as they have an instinct to protect their young from danger. It can be normal for a mom cat to hiss or growl, especially during the first few days being in a new environment.

If a mom cat does not allow you access to her kittens, place her food further away from the nest/bed and handle the kittens during mom's mealtime (you can give mom extra treats when you're around). Make sure the foster area is a calm, quiet place and that there is a warm semi-hidden spot that the mom can put her kittens (such as a sideways cardboard box or open cabinet) but that you still have easy access to. It is important that the kittens are handled so that they become socialized with people, so if you are having issues with a mom cat's behavior, please contact Lifeline of Galveston County.



## Section 5: Foster Program FAQs

### Indoors vs. outdoors

All of our foster cats and kittens must be kept 100% indoors, with no risk of getting outside. Foster cats and kittens may not be taken outside at any time, unless secured in a travel carrier.

### Allergies & cats

If you or someone you live with is allergic to your foster kitten(s), you are welcome to notify the foster coordinator. Extra sweeping/vacuuming is a great way to reduce basic allergies. If allergies are affecting a person's breathing or are causing major irritation, we may choose to end the foster experience early.

### People emergencies

Emergencies happen! If you are suddenly unable to continue caring for your foster animals before their expected return date, please contact Lifeline of Galveston County as soon as possible.

### Adoption information

#### *If you have an adopter*

If you have an adopter for one or more of your foster kittens, or if you would like to adopt your own foster kitten, you must let Lifeline of Galveston County know immediately.

You (or the interested adopter) must be able to provide the following information:

- Person's full name
- Phone number
- Email
- Street Address

To be approved for adoption, the interested adopter must be able to meet all our adoption requirements.

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*Please Note: You may not transfer the care of your foster animal to anyone else without the knowledge and permission of the foster coordinator.*

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### *Will all my fosters get adopted?*

Generally, yes! All kittens and mom cats that are healthy enough for spay/neuter surgery will immediately be available for adoption upon returning from foster care. If an animal is deferred from surgery or has any issue preventing them from being available for adoption (such as illness or behavioral concerns), Lifeline of Galveston County will continue to care for them as needed until they are ready.

Please keep in mind that not all kittens who are fostered survive to adoptable age. Many things can cause a kitten to die, both while in foster and even occasionally upon returning to our care. As such, adoption of your foster kitten(s) is not guaranteed.

## **Additional Resources**

For lots more information about kittens and their care, please visit the websites below.

- [kittenlady.org](http://kittenlady.org)
- [resources.bestfriends.org/kittens](http://resources.bestfriends.org/kittens)
- [maddiesfund.org/orphaned-kitten-care-how-to](http://maddiesfund.org/orphaned-kitten-care-how-to)