

Nursing Mothers and Their Kittens

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Introduction

Fostering a mom cat with kittens is a very exciting and rewarding job. You will get to see intimately how a mom cat cares for her kittens, and the stages of development in their relationship. The foster home's job is to be the supportive foster parent, providing a calm, safe, nurturing environment. Instinct tells mom cats to keep their kittens safe, and in order to feel safe, they need privacy, quiet, and minimal activity. Stress can cause cats to become aggressive, and to not take care of their babies properly, and in some instances even causes extreme behaviors such as cannibalism. Your role is to give the mom cat the type of environment where she can feel comfortable raising her young.

No fostered animals should be allowed to mingle with your own pets for the first two weeks after you bring them home. This is to protect both the foster pets and your own pets from any infectious agents they may bring from the shelter.

Getting Started

Every home which intends to foster a mom cat with kittens should have a separate room, away from the hub of daily activity. A home with no other pets is ideal, but if you do have pets, you should be able to prevent your pet from going up to the door of the private room. Mom cat fosters are not recommended if you have a dog, unless it is a very mellow and quiet dog. If your home environment is loud and/or active, such as with young children, you may want to consider a different type of foster. You will need to set up the room for your foster mom and babies before you let any of them out of the carrier. Ideally, you should do this before you get the kitties from AAC. The room should have one or two larger "safe spaces" or nests, boxes on their sides, or an empty litter box lined with towels, etc. Mom will want to choose somewhere to keep her kittens. The AAC may also provide you with a kennel, which, once you take the door off, can make a nice cubby for mom and babies. When you first let mom out, do not pet her or make too many advances. Leave her alone with the kittens, with the door to the room closed, to explore her new home. Adult cats can take a while to adjust to new places, and mom cats are no exception. They may take a few days or more to come out of hiding.

Feeding

Make sure mom has access to plenty of wet and dry food. Nursing mother cats need to eat a high quality kitten formula food. If she is a picky eater, do not hesitate to try feeding her canned tuna, chicken or salmon. Do not give cow's milk to cats, despite popular belief, it is impossible for cat's to digest and often causes serious stomach upset. Her calorie intake needs to remain very high to maintain nursing her kittens. Make sure she always has access to fresh water.

Eliminating

Ideally, the litter box will be as far away from the food and water as possible. Litter preference is up to the foster home but the box should be scooped at least 2 times a day, and dumped out once weekly. Once the kittens start using the litter box, you will likely need to add low-sided boxes that are easy for the kittens to get in and out of, and clean more frequently.

Socialization

Proceed slowly with any adult cat you do not know - let her come to you, pet her only as much as she is comfortable with, stop petting at the first signs of discomfort. These signs may include: swishing tail, ears laid back or to the sides, head jerk towards your hand or the area which you were petting her, tensing up, cranky overdrawn meow, moving away, hissing, or growling. Even a momma cat needs playtime. Make sure to have solo-play toys as well as interactive play sessions with mom, after kittens are 2-3 weeks old she may show more interest in play.



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Mom's Care of the Kittens



For the first few weeks of life, mom should do everything necessary for the kittens. After that, you can start sharing some of the kitten care duties with her, if she is willing! Below is an explanation of the normal care a mom cat gives to her kittens, with an approximate timeline, so you will know what behaviors to expect. All cats are slightly different, with some being more attentive moms than others, but if a mom cat fails to care for her babies in any of these important functions, let us know as soon as possible so they can all be evaluated by medical staff.

Nursing: Kittens begin to nurse 1-2 hours after birth. Though born with their eyes closed, they can find their mother by her warmth, and she should make this easier by lying near them on her side. The nursing/suckling relationship occurs over 3 stages. In the beginning, mom initiates each nursing episode, waking the kittens by licking them and then encircling them with her body. After a little searching, kittens quickly latch on. The second stage occurs after the second or third week, when the kitten's eyes and ears are functioning and they can interact with the mother both inside and outside the nest. At this stage, the kittens also initiate some of the nursing episodes. The mother generally cooperates by lying down and taking up the nursing position. In the third stage, starting at about 5 weeks postpartum, the kittens initiate virtually all nursing. The mother becomes gradually more evasive and uncooperative. Near the end of this stage, the mother begins to wean her kittens by becoming less and less available. In wild cats, this is the time when the mom would begin to provide them with fresh killed prey. You can help in the weaning process by encouraging the babies to eat canned, and later dry food.

Grooming: Kittens receive a lot of grooming and licking from their mothers during their first 2-4 weeks. This anogenital grooming stimulates elimination, and the fecal matter and urine are consumed by the mom. This is effective in keeping the nest and babies clean. Later, as the young are able to leave the nest area, the anogenital licking subsides, and the young deposit feces and urine nearby. At this point, providing cardboard litter boxes nearby will teach them to use the litter box. You generally do not need to intervene at this point, though there is more cleaning as things certainly get messier!



Problem Behaviors in Mother Cats

- **Maternal Aggression Towards People**

Occasionally, mother cats have strong protective instincts against humans as well. They may hiss, growl, or strike out if you approach the kittens. AAC attempts to screen for these behaviors, but sometimes they will develop down the line. If faced with this situation, move very slowly around the mom cat and the nest. Wear long sleeved sweatshirt to protect you as you clean around her. Try to bribe her with tasty treats such as chicken baby food. Speak in a soft, reassuring voice, and try not to react if mom cat hisses or growls. DO NOT correct the cat by spraying her with water or other types of correction. Remember, she is acting out of a natural instinct to protect her young, and if you act in a threatening manner, she will also escalate her behavior.

- **Maternal Aggression Towards Other Animals**

Aggressive behavior towards cats or dogs is very common in mom cats, as they are trying to protect their young. Please do not try to introduce your foster cats to other animals. This can be very stressful, and offers no advantages. Please block any avenues they may have for seeing other cats or dogs, and strictly enforce separation from your resident pets. If for some reason, the mom cat sees another animal and is upset, quickly remove source of anxiety/ cover up window, etc. and leave the room. Do not attempt to comfort or reassure the mom cat or babies. Come back in 20 minutes or so to check on them.

- **Maternal Neglect**

About 8% of kittens die from inadequate maternal care. The deaths are usually due to hypothermia if the kitten strays away and is not retrieved, or improper/inadequate nursing at birth and after. Maternal neglect has several causes: some cats seem to lack maternal instincts. In some cases, it is nature's way: if kittens have birth defects or otherwise weak at birth, the mom may ignore them, or as discussed below, cannibalize them. In many cases, it seems that environmental stress plays a role, and thus it is very important that the environment be kept quiet, calm and with few visits. Except to feed, clean, and check in on the babies a few brief times a day, cats should primarily be left alone the first 2 weeks postpartum.

You will need to watch daily for signs that a mother is neglecting her young, especially in the first few weeks. Call us if:

- * the mother spends all her time away from the kittens
- *she does not groom or nurse them frequently
- *the kittens cry and she seems not to respond

- **Cannibalism**

Some queens may cannibalize one or more of their kittens. This does not appear to be a reflection of inexperience in mother cats. It may result from anxiety brought on by too much human interference, or the stresses of other cats or dogs in the immediate environment. There can also be evolutionary causes for cannibalism, such as if the kitten has some (sometimes not obvious) defect. If a mom cat is aggressive towards their kittens, you should separate them from her and call TLAC for further advice.

Fortunately, maternal neglect and cannibalism are quite rare, and often occur in the first few days after birth, so most of you will not see these behaviors, but it is important to know in any case.