

Orphaned? Abandoned?

You've found young kittens with no mother cat nearby. What should you do?

You just found a group of tiny newborn kittens and their mother is nowhere to be seen. Before that rescue instinct kicks in and you scoop them up, take a deep breath, step back, and evaluate the situation. In most cases, removing the kittens is not the best response.

HEALTHY KITTENS? GIVE MOM TIME:

The kittens' best chances for survival are with their mom. Mother cats may leave their kittens for several hours at a time. If the kittens are warm and don't appear sick or in distress, their mom is likely nearby, getting food or hiding from you. Keep in mind that your presence may keep mom cat away, so monitor the nest from a distance. Or you may sprinkle a ring of flour around the nest or place some light twigs atop the kittens. If these are disturbed when you return or the kittens have full, rounded bellies, the mother cat is caring for her babies.

YOUR IMMEDIATE ROLE:

Help the mother cat do her job:

Provide high-calorie food and fresh water in a nearby location (but not too close to her nest). Keep your distance and let her do the hard work of raising her babies.

Canvas the neighborhood: Mother cats will often move away from their regular feeding area to give birth. She could be someone's pet or a member of a group of community cats being fed nearby. Talk with your neighbors and post on local social media sites to learn who may have been feeding her.

Research local resources: It's never too soon to start contacting local rescue groups and shelters about foster care, low-cost spay/neuter and other veterinary resources, and trap-neuter-return programs in your region.

Plan for your feline family's future: You may trap-neuter-return the kittens when they're old enough (most clinics will sterilize kittens when they're at least 8 weeks old and weigh 2 pounds or more). And don't forget the mother cat in your spay/neuter plans!

ABANDONED OR SICK KITTENS?:

If the kittens are truly abandoned or appear sick, cold or nonresponsive when you touch them, you need a different game plan. The younger the kittens are, the quicker you'll need to act and the more care they'll need.

YOUR IMMEDIATE ROLE:

Stabilize the kittens: Place the kittens in a warm, safe place with a gentle heat source (but one they can move away from if they grow too warm). Assess their overall health.

Feed carefully: Never feed cow's milk to kittens, and don't try to feed them if they're cold or overheated. Learn what and how to feed young kittens.

Find help: Contact an animal welfare organization or shelter that can help you assess the situation. Most animal shelters don't have staff able to provide

the 24/7 care newborn kittens require, but they may have an experienced foster volunteer available. If not, they may be able to provide financial assistance for veterinary care or supplies to help you care for the kittens yourself.

How old are the kittens?

Knowing the kittens' approximate age will help guide your decisions. Kittens grow fast, and their needs change week by week. At birth, kittens' eyes are closed, their ears are folded, and they can't see or hear. By 2 weeks old, their eyes are open, their ears are unfolding and they're managing a wobbly walk. By 8 weeks old, most kittens will be eating independently and confidently exploring their world.

