

The AVA Guide to Fostering Queens and Kittens

Thank you for becoming an AVA Foster Parent!

This Guide is intended to support fosters who take in a pregnant cat, a queen and her kittens, or orphaned kittens. Please refer to the [AVA Guide for Foster Parents](#) for general information about preparation, feline behaviour, scratching, handling and grooming, inappropriate elimination, and socializing.

Kitten season refers to the time of year when most kittens are born, encompassing early spring to late fall. This can be truly problematic for animal shelters and rescue groups because too many kittens and too few foster homes mean that resources are stretched to the limit. By agreeing to foster for AVA you can help us save lives and alleviate the abundance of homeless, helpless kittens.



Fostering a pregnant cat and caring for her until she gives birth, and then continuing to care for her and her kittens, is a very special type of fostering that can be very rewarding. However, before taking on such a fostering job you must be prepared to make a substantial commitment of energy and time – **the average length of this assignment is two to three months**, so fosters should take this into consideration.

Action Volunteers for Animals (AVA) is an all-volunteer-run charitable animal rescue dedicated to helping stray and feral animals live healthy and happy lives.

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Before you Start

Appropriate Foster Homes for Queens and Kittens

Queens and kittens must be housed **inside the home at all times** in a relatively quiet, calm, low-activity environment. They are not to be kept in a garage, on a balcony, in an unfinished, unheated basement, or outside. They need to be situated in their own space or Safe Room/Sanctuary Room, away from your pets, young children and general high traffic areas. The room should have a door that can be kept closed as this is crucial for newborn kittens.

No young children should have access to this space or room without parental supervision at all times.

Caring for kittens can be quite time consuming but if the mother is feeding her kittens the task can be less intensive. However, if the mother is absent or unable to feed, supplemental feeding will be required. Supplemental feeding takes place every 2 hours, 24 hours a day in the early stages and is reduced later to every 4 hours, 24 hours a day.

Basic Supplies: What to Prepare

- Record-keeping sheets to track daily weights.
- Small kitchen scale suitable for weighing kittens.
- Syringes, bottles and nipples.
- Kitten Milk Replacer (KMR).
- Pedialyte.
- Heating pads and warm blankets.
- Pet-safe cleaning products for sanitizing, and also for cleaning kittens (e.g. soft washcloths, fragrance-free baby wipes).
- Puppy pads to keep the safe room and feeding areas clean.
- Kitten food (wet and dry) suitable for moms and babies. Chicken food made for babies (e.g. Gerber) may help with fussy or sick kittens that are weaned.
- Cat carrier – either a plastic sturdy carrier or a good quality soft sided carrier. AVA can lend you a carrier if you do not already have one.
- Nail clippers.
- Soft bristled brush. You may need soft toothbrushes for comforting orphaned kittens.

- Adult sized litter box and scoop for mom. Small, low-entry litter box if you are fostering kittens. You may need multiple boxes depending on the size of the litter.
- Kitten-safe non-clumping, unscented litter like Yesterday's News.
- Metal or ceramic food dishes, not plastic as they can harbor bacteria. Use shallow food dishes and plates that will be easier for young kittens.
- Heavier water dishes that will not tip over easily.
- Cat toys including interactive wand toys and self-play toys, such as mice, crinkle balls and other suitable toys, tunnels, play mats and circular scratcher toys (e.g. Turbo Scratcher).
- Scratching posts (horizontal and/or vertical). Horizontal cardboard scratchers are good for small kittens.
- If possible, cat furniture, such as cat trees and perches where they can climb and rest.

Prepare Your Safe Room/Sanctuary Room

Your foster cat(s)/kittens will need its own space, which is usually a spare bedroom, a den or an extra bathroom where you can keep the cat(s) safe and comfortable. This is necessary in order to provide a place of security for your new cat so that it can adjust to its new surroundings that include you, your family members and provide mom with a safe place to give birth and take care of her kittens.

In general, set up the safe room with a large-enough litter box, a comfy, cozy place to sleep, water and food dishes, toys and hopefully a window for your cat to look out. You will need to cat-proof this room.

It is highly recommended that you keep the new cat isolated from any resident pets and in this safe room. See the [AVA Foster Policy](#) for information on integrating foster cats with resident pets.

It is important to block off any “bad hiding” spots, such as under a bed, dresser, or any small space that is dangerous for a cat or kitten to be. Hiding reinforces fear in timid cats, so a healthy alternative should be provided. This can be a cubby bed, a pet tent, or even a box on its side with a soft blanket in it. “Good hiding” spots will always allow you to make eye contact with your foster cat, especially if mom is shy.

Some foster parents prefer to use a soft-sided animal playpen. They are often easy to assemble and store away, and help facilitate handling of animals.

Pens are suitable for pregnant or new moms.

Cat Proofing Your Home: The Safety Checklist

All surfaces in the safe room that the cat can reach should be wiped down with a diluted water/bleach solution of 10% bleach (½ cup bleach to a gallon of water). Scrubbing Bubbles can be used. Do not use Lysol, Pine Sol, 409, Spic and Span, or any cleaner ending with 'ol'; these are highly toxic to both kittens and cats.

The real secret to cat proofing your home is to look at each room through their eyes. Get down on the floor and see the world from their view: if anything looks like it might make a great toy or is potentially harmful, remove it.

- Remove all things that a cat might break or harmful substances it might ingest:
 - Human and cat medications should be kept secure and out of reach.
 - Human foods and living plants that may be toxic or harmful. Plants like cat grass are safe.
- Keep all craft supplies such as needles, thread and balls of yarn in a closed container as these can be fatal if swallowed.
- Secure window blinds so the cat cannot get tangled up in the cord or strangled.
- All windows must have screens on them that are in good repair.
- Clear the floor of rubber bands, ribbon and hair ties as these are all hazardous when ingested and can require surgery.
- Keep cupboard doors and dresser drawers securely closed.
- Cover electrical cords with covers, sold for that purpose, or anything that will keep the cat from chewing on the cords.
- Make sure that each heating and air vent is enclosed with a secure metal cover.
- Please ensure that all toilet lids in your home are down at all times to prevent the cat from using it as a water bowl (or for playtime!)
- If your floors are carpeted, you may wish to put a vinyl covering/tarp over the area in the safe room.
- Keep balcony doors closed and the balcony off limits to your cat at all times.
- As noted above, block off any dangerous or “bad hiding” spots.

Nesting or Birthing Box

A nesting box or birthing box is where your queen can give birth. It should be a warm, quiet and comfortable space where mom will feel safe enough to give birth. Many queens prefer a covered space.

It can be a cardboard box that is big enough for her to lie down in and nurse her babies when they arrive. The sides should be tall enough so the kittens will stay safe and not fall out. You can line the box with plastic and then newspaper, which is easily removed if it becomes soiled, and cover it with a blanket or heavy towel.

If possible, the nesting box should be warmer than the rest of the room to support the kittens when they are at their most fragile during the first few days of life.

Feeding

- Your pregnant or nursing mother cat will need both **kitten** wet (canned) food and kitten dry food, unless told otherwise (for example, allergies and special diets). **Pregnant and nursing moms require more daily calories than other cats.**
- AVA will provide dry kitten kibble. Additional purchased kibble is eligible for a tax receipt from AVA. Foster parents provide wet food, and can either retain all receipts for a charitable tax receipt at the end of the year, or can claim for cash reimbursement according to the [AVA Foster Policy](#).
 - In general, it is important to note that cats are obligate carnivores: named animal protein should be the main ingredients in their food. Choose a food with fewer by-products and fillers, such as corn, wheat, soy and other by-products. Most fillers have little nutritional value for cats.
- Serve wet food at room temperature – “mouse temperature” – as most cats don't like cold food. We recommend feeding mom wet food twice daily in order to ensure she stays hydrated, in addition to providing her consistent access to kibble.
- Monitor your mom's eating habits daily to ensure that all is well.
- Avoid packaged/processed treats on a daily basis; try good quality treats like freeze dried meats.
- Always provide fresh water daily.

Litter Box

- Starting with a brand new litter box is highly recommended. Use an uncovered box to start with so that it is easily accessible to your cat. Use a low entry box for kittens or cats with mobility issues (for example, cats with Cerebellar Hypoplasia.)
- You will likely need multiple litter boxes as your kittens grow.
- Keep the litter box away from doors, noisy appliances and as far away as is possible from water and food dishes.
- **Do not use clumping litter for young kittens** as it can stick to their fur and they may ingest it. Wait until 8 to 12 weeks of age before introducing clumping litter to your kitten.
 - **Use a non-clumping paper type litter such as Yesterday's News, unscented only.**
- Use only enough litter to cover the bottom of the box, so that the cat can scratch through to the bottom.
- Scoop the litter box once at least per day, more if you are fostering kittens or multiple cats, adding more litter as needed.
- Litter should be dumped and changed every second or third day and the box washed. Wash the litter box with warm soapy water, replacing all the litter.
- Kittens can be introduced to the litter box starting at about 3 weeks of age.

Clumping Litter for Older Kittens

- If you change from a paper litter to a clumping litter for kittens 8 weeks and older, do so gradually. While working on the process of changing the type of litter, keep a extra litter box with the old litter available continue to add some of the new to it. Cats are creatures of habit and are slow to adjust to change of any kind.
- Always monitor for any signs of diarrhea, constipation, straining to urinate or excessive urination. If you are concerned, check with your AVA representative immediately.

The Birthing Stages

The gestational period is from 57 to 69 days with the average being 63 days. The number of kittens is usually between two to five, sometimes more.

The queen must be kept indoors and in the sanctuary room prior to and after birth. Never let her out of the home as she could become pregnant again even while nursing or suffer some trauma and never return.

Nesting

The queen should be kept in her Sanctuary Room at all times. A few days before delivery, the queen will begin to show signs of “nesting” behaviour. In order to assist the queen, encourage her to sleep in and spend time in her nesting or birthing box. If the queen does not take to the box simply move it to another area of the room if possible and see if she will use it there.

Behavioural Changes

You may notice a number of changes in the queen’s behaviour prior to her going into labour. It is important to know what are normal changes as opposed to behavioural changes that may require veterinary attention. Normal behaviour may include restless pacing, panting, excessive grooming (especially in the area of her genitals), and excessive vocalization.

In the days leading up to labour she may also become increasingly affectionate, wanting to be near you at all times. Of course the opposite could also be true and a queen may withdraw from human contact and instead stay close to her nesting area often sleeping more than usual.

Physical Signs of Labour

A few days leading up to the active labour there, watch for several physical signs: the abdomen may “drop” and her nipples may become larger and pinker in preparation for feeding. Approximately 24 hours prior to labour you may also notice a milky discharge from her nipples. Leading up to labour there will likely be a drop in body temperature; the normal temperature in cats is between 100.4°F and 102.5°F.

Active Labour

At this stage the contractions will have started and you will see the appearance of the amniotic sac, you may also see a discharge of blood or other coloured fluid. For the most part the queen will take care of this by herself but you must keep a close watch and intervene if anything seems to be going wrong. Please advise your Foster Coordinator/Contact if you feel that things are not going well and the mother cat should see a veterinarian.

During the Birth

The entire birthing process may take up to six hours. The first kitten should arrive within an hour of the start of active labor, and subsequent kittens will take anywhere from 30 to 60 minutes. She may rest for 15 minutes or so between kittens. This allows the mother cat to remove the kitten from its amniotic sac and stimulate the kittens to breathe by washing them with her rough tongue.

She will also sever the umbilical cord by chewing on it approximately one inch from the kitten’s body. The placenta should be expelled after each kitten, at which point the

queen should eat it. It is important to count the placentas in case one of the placentas is not expelled.

If there is a break for over four hours and you are sure there are remaining kittens, the queen should be examined by a veterinarian. Notify your Foster Coordinator/Contact immediately.

If the queen ignores the kitten and it is still in its sac, it will be up to you to carefully cut the sac and stimulate the kitten's breathing by rubbing it gently with a small, rough, dry towel. Ensure that the kitten's airways are clear otherwise the kitten may suffocate.

The kittens should immediately gravitate toward a nipple, latch on, and begin to nurse. If they do not you should help them by placing them near a nipple. In the event that a kitten does not feed off the mother you may need to feed it, and in the case the kitten is rejected by the mother, hand rearing may be necessary.

Make sure there is plenty of food (kitten type) and water close by as soon as all the kittens are born; the queen will want to eat. Keep plenty of fresh water on hand as she must stay hydrated.

Make sure that mother cat and her newborn kittens are warm and dry. They must not get chilled. It might be necessary to use a heating pad set on the low setting in the nesting box. Be careful to monitor the heating pad at all times and check on mom and kittens as often as possible.

Caring for Mother Cat & Kittens

Daily Monitoring

When the kittens are born it is important to **keep a chart of their daily weights**, and to also check that they are nursing and that the mother cat has enough milk. There are many [monitoring chart templates](#) available or you can create your own.

Kittens weigh anywhere from 80-140 grams (2.5-5 ounces) and they should gain 100 grams or 3.5 ounces per week.

If the queen for some reason is not feeding the kittens or they are just not getting enough milk to gain weight, **you will have to intervene and force feed them by syringe**. See [Kitten Feeding Schedule](#) for specific instructions.

Monitor the kittens while they are eating to ensure that they all get their equal share and none are being pushed to the side. Mother cats may refuse to feed the weaker kittens, or kittens with deformities, so you will have to.

Mother cat will try to keep her nesting box as clean as she can but it will become soiled so you will need to help her maintain it by laundering soiled bedding and changing newspapers.

Kitten Feeding Schedule

Weigh the kittens every morning before feeding to see if they are gaining.

Age	Weight	KMR : Water Ratio	How Often	mL/Feed	Total mL/Day
1 week	100g/3.5oz	1:3	Every 2 hours	2-3mL	26mL
	150g/5.2oz	2:3	Every 2 hours	3-4mL	39mL
2 weeks	200g/7oz	2:3	Every 2-3 hours	8-9mL	52mL
	250g/8.8oz	2:3	Every 4 hours	12-13mL	65mL
3 weeks	300g/10.5oz	2:3	Every 4 hours	15-16mL	78mL
	350g/12.3oz	2:3	Every 4 hours	18-20mL	91mL
4 weeks	400g/14.1oz	2:3 (mix a very small amount of A/D or Recovery wet food with KMR)	Every 4 hours	20-22mL	104mL
	450g/15.8oz	2:3 (increase A/D or Recovery wet while decreasing same amount of KMR)	Every 4 hours (but can skip overnight feeds)	23-24mL	117mL

If you are not sure how old the kittens are, you can refer this to this [Kitten Lady resource](#) to help you determine age. It also includes information about developmental and physical milestones.

Orphaned or Ignored Kittens

If the mother cat ignores her kittens or if you are fostering kittens that are orphaned, it is extremely important to keep the kittens warm at all times. Orphaned kittens can die quickly if they are chilled. Use a heating pad on one side of the nesting box only, so that the kittens can move away if they get too warm. It is important to keep the pad at a low setting and cover it with a towel or blanket that is tightly tucked in so the kittens do not get caught in the bedding and smother.

Sometimes it is helpful to wrap a hot water bottle in a cozy towel or blanket and put it in the nesting box with the kittens for warmth and comfort.

Keep on hand commercial kitten formula such a KMR or equivalent, feeding bottles or syringes, feeding chart and record keeping sheets as it is important to record each kitten's weight daily, and how much it eats.

Refer to the [Kitten Feeding Schedule](#) to figure out how much to feed and how often. Feeding a chilled kitten can be fatal, so wait until its temperature is up to its normal range of 95°F to 99°F before attempting to feed it.

If a kitten's temperature falls below 94°F it must be warmed gradually to avoid metabolic shock. At the same time, give it Pedialyte (the same as sold for human babies) to hydrate and prevent shock, which can be found at drugstores.

The [Kitten Feeding Schedule](#) includes instructions for feeding by age and weight of the kitten. Tiny kittens will need to eat as many as 12 meals daily, one feeding every two hours around the clock.

You must plan to be available for all of those vital and very important feedings.

A one week old kitten weighing 100g needs KMR formula with a ratio of 1:3; the first number indicates the powdered KMR and the second number is the water; so this kitten would need one level scoop of the KMR powder mixed with 3 scoops of warm water.

Repeat that ratio a few times to mix up enough of the KMR formula to last for several feedings over 24 hours and store it in the fridge.

Sterilize syringes/feeding bottles with boiling water before filling with kitten formula for each feeding. If using syringes, they should be carefully washed immediately after each feeding with warm water and separated to dry. They can be reused.

Do not warm formula in the microwave: it creates hot spots that might burn the kitten's mouth. Instead set the filled bottle in a bowl of very warm water to raise it to the right temperature. If using a syringe, fill the syringe from the bottle containing the heated formula. It is important to warm the formula so the kittens do not get tummy pains.

Use a whisk, not an electric blender to mix the KMR to maintain the nutritional value.

Once you have opened a tin of KMR, it must be refrigerated.

Never feed a kitten other types of milk (cow, goat etc).

How to Feed a Kitten

- Until the kittens are about three weeks old, they will need help with urinating and defecating. If mom is not doing this, you will need to try to stimulate the kitten to pee/poop **before each feeding**. Use a soft washcloth or warm, damp toilet paper to stimulate the anus and urinary openings. [Learn more about stimulating your kitten](#).
- Wrap the kitten up like a burrito in a small, soft towel or cat blanket with only its head sticking out as this will help keep it from squirming and simplifies the feeding process.

- Feed kittens while they are resting on their tummies, not held in your arms like a human baby. Tipping them on their backs to feed can cause them to aspirate fluid into their lungs.
- If aspiration occurs, support the kitten's head while turning it upside down; place its back to your chest and gently rub its chest. (You should call your Foster Contact immediately).
- Make sure the formula is warm and that you have the correct amount for the kitten in front of you. Place the syringe in the side of the kitten's mouth and release the plunger slowly, allowing a small amount out at a time.
- While syringe feeding kittens, place one finger lightly on the kitten's throat to feel them swallow; this way if they slow down or stop you know to stop pushing the syringe, which prevents aspiration.
- Let the kitten breathe as you feed it, do not rush.
- Try to feed the kitten the amount that is indicated on [Kitten Feeding Schedule](#) for its age and weight, never double the amount. If the kitten seems to want more, leave it and finish feeding the others then go back to that same kitten.
- Make sure that it has pooped/peed at least once recently, and then you can give it one more syringe full. If it did not pee before being fed, then stimulate the kitten after feeding.
- If the kittens are eating well but still seem hungry, then it may be time to increase their daily amount or add some solid food; see [Kitten Feeding Schedule](#) for specific instructions.
- Once you have fed your kittens, it is important to make sure that you have cleaned all the KMR formula off their fur by using a soft cloth rinsed in warm water. Any formula left on the fur can irritate the skin and cause pieces of fur to fall out.
- Ensure that kittens are completely dry before returning them to the mother cat or their nesting box.

At three or four weeks, you can start training the kittens to eat food from a dish. Do so by mixing some canned kitten food with the KMR formula and mush it until it is a thick liquid or slurry. You will probably need to introduce the kittens to the food by putting a bit of the mixture on your fingertip, then showing them the saucer of food. As the kittens learn to eat and enjoy their "mush" you can gradually reduce the amount of KMR formula. By four weeks of age you can introduce some solid food as long as the kittens have been eating and gaining weight. AVA will provide you with dry kitten food.

As soon as the kittens start eating solid food, a bowl of water should be available at all times.

Weaning and Solid Food

Keep note of your foster's eating habits, including how much it eats, preferences for wet or dry and how it eats (e.g. sucking, nibbling, chewing, swallowing whole chunks) using the daily monitoring sheet.

By four weeks of age the kittens should be introduced to solid food which means using the A/D or Recovery canned food and adding some to the KMR bit by bit. See [Kitten Feeding Schedule](#) and by then you should check with your Foster Contact for more instructions.

Mother cat's calories should be reduced as she is weaning to help slow milk production.

Health Monitoring

It is very important to monitor your foster's health on a daily basis as many rescue kittens have been exposed to illness before they come into our program. Should you notice any of the following conditions in your foster kittens or you feel that something is not right, please do not hesitate to get in touch with your Foster Contact immediately.

Recognizing Illness in Your Fosters

- Lack of appetite and weight loss
- Dehydration
- Increase in drinking
- Dragging hindquarters on the floor
- Lethargy (lack of energy), low energy or hiding
- Diarrhea lasting more than 3 or 4 feedings (2 feedings for kittens)
- Bloody diarrhea of any duration
- Constipation, bloating
- Vomiting
- Coughing and sneezing, runny discharge from nose or eyes
- Physical issues including an enlarged abdomen, red or swollen gums, excessive drooling or lumps.
- Difficulty breathing needs medical assessment immediately
- Straining to urinate needs medical assessment immediately

- Bleeding and/or trauma caused by accident or fall needs medical assessment immediately
- Watch for signs of mastitis in your mother cat during weaning. Rock hard, bright red or painful mammary glands need medical assessment immediately.

Giving Medications and Providing Medical Care

Should your foster require medication, the following instructions should be useful. Kittens are not always very co-operative when getting medications, so if you are having trouble medicating your foster, please advise your Foster Contact and they will help you. It is imperative that your foster receives the necessary medication as prescribed.

Giving a Pill

- Place one hand on top of the kitten's head so the thumb and forefinger are on either side of its jaw, tilt the head back until the nose points up. The mouth should open a little.
- Hold the pill between the thumb and forefinger of the other hand and use the middle finger to gently open the kitten's mouth.
- Drop the pill as far back into the throat as possible and quickly push the pill back in the mouth by putting your finger between the top and bottom canines. Do not put your finger in from the side of the kitten's mouth because you are more likely to be bitten that way.
- Close the kitten's mouth and keep the head still tilted back, and stroke the throat to encourage it to swallow. Release the kitten when you are sure that the pill has been swallowed. Praise and comfort the kitten when finished. If you prefer them, you may use a "pill popper," which is easier for some people to use.

Liquid Medication

Liquid medication is drawn into a syringe for exact dosing. The kitten is held in the same manner as giving a pill but instead of pushing the liquid straight back into its mouth, slowly push the liquid into the side of its mouth.

Hiding Medication in Food

Ideally, medication should be given directly to your foster to ensure it is receiving the necessary dosage. However, if it is very nervous or fearful, liquid medication or crushed tablets can be hidden in a small amount of strong smelling canned food. This should be mixed into a very small serving, about a tablespoon, and the best time is in the morning when your foster is hungry.

Other Resources

In addition to this AVA Guide, there are reputable sources for additional information on how to care for moms and babies:

- [The Kitten Lady](#) specializes in caring for orphaned kittens.
- [The Animal Humane Society](#) has additional information on caring for mom.
- [Alley Cat Allies](#) provides resources, including great visuals, on kitten progression and developmental milestones.

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