



Passionately Serving Animals and the People They Love

5335 SW 42nd Avenue
Portland, OR 97221
(503) 292-6628
www.AnimalAidPDX.org

IF YOU FIND KITTENS

The time between late spring and early autumn is known as “kitten season”. During this time of year, feral and unaltered stray cats reproduce prolifically. Your first instinct when you see kittens may be to swoop them up and take them home. This is usually not in the best interest of the kittens—or you. Socializing and caring for feral kittens is a time-consuming process which requires devotion, patience, and attention. There are many factors to consider if attempting to ‘rescue’ homeless kittens which can be crucial to their survival, such as their age, the weather, or the whereabouts of the mother. Always take time and think things through BEFORE attempting to alter the lives of these young and delicate animals.

Things to Consider

A mother cat will periodically leave her nest to hunt for food, to move the kittens, or to breed. If you see young kittens without their mother, **it is likely she will return**. It is always better for young kittens to remain with their mother. Pre-weaned kittens (under 4 weeks) without a mother are difficult to care for and have a high mortality rate. If you find young kittens and don’t see the mother, don’t panic and don’t disturb the kittens. Leave the kittens alone for a few hours (if they are 0-4 weeks old) or overnight (if the kittens are older) and watch from a distance to see if the mother returns. You can put out cat food for the mom and a box the mother could use but, don’t put the kittens inside, just put it near them. **Don’t touch the kittens or the nest, this can discourage the mother from returning to them.** Altering the scent of a kitten can be enough to cause the mother to ignore or abandon them. It is important that you do not take pre-weaned kittens away from their mother. They should remain with her for at least 5 weeks. Only take them in if, after watching for several hours, you are 100% certain she is not returning.

Determining Age

Kittens develop at their own speed based on environmental and genetic factors. Observing physical signs, such as how open their eyes are and their weight, as well as behaviors, like when kittens begin venturing from their mother or using a litter box, will help. If the kittens found do not have their eyes open or are not yet strong enough to walk, it can be determined that they are under 4 weeks old and therefore should be kept with their mother if possible. Alley Cat Allies has a photo progression guide on their website at: <http://www.alleycat.org/Page.aspx?pid=678>

Alley Cat Allies also provides this written guide for determining kitten age:

- *Under one week:* (3-8 oz.) Eyes are shut, ears are folded down, and kittens are unable to walk. They can purr and make tiny noises. The umbilical cord may still be visible.
- *One-two weeks:* (8-11 oz.) Eyes start to open (they are blue) and focus. Ears begin to open and movement is improved to crawling, snuggling, and kneading.
- *Three weeks:* (7.5-14.5 oz.) Eyes fully open and ears are open and standing up. The kitten will start to respond to noises and movement. The first wobbly steps are taken and baby teeth start to come in.
- *Four-five weeks:* (8-16.75 oz.) Running, playing, digging, and pouncing occur often. Kittens will start to wean and will be able to lap up formula, eat soft food, and use the litter box by themselves. Eyes have fully changed from blue to their adult color.
- *Eight weeks:* (2 lbs) Kittens look like little versions of full grown cats.

Choosing Your Next Move

What you do next will depend on the age of the kittens as well as your own situation. Most shelters are not able to place kittens that are less than 8 weeks old or kittens that are not tame. Furthermore, during kitten season, many shelters are so overwhelmed that they are not a reliable quick-fix solution. If you are not in a position to keep the kittens, be sure to contact your county shelter BEFORE touching or altering their situation in any way. Some county shelters can take in stray kittens at a certain age, while others cannot. Some will require certain things, such as a fixed donation per cat or specific vaccinations and tests PRIOR to accepting stray kittens. **ALMOST ALL NO-KILL SHELTERS WILL REQUIRE YOU TO BE ON A WAITING LIST BEFORE ACCEPTING KITTENS.** This means you will have to be willing to foster them (often for an unknown length of time) before they are taken into the shelter.

If the kittens are un-weaned (0-4 weeks)

- FIRST, make absolutely sure that the mother will not return.
- If the kittens are younger than 5 weeks and their mother does not return after leaving the kittens overnight then they will need constant care to bottle feed. Bottle-feeding requires feeding the kittens frequently (approx. every 2-4 hours) with special food called Kitten Milk Replacement (KMR) and it can be very time consuming as well as expensive.
- Kittens under 4 weeks old cannot relieve themselves and rely on the mother to stimulate their genitals and anus to urinate and defecate. Anyone taking in a bottle baby needs use a washcloth to do this for the kitten.
- Do not feed kittens any milk other than Kitten Replacement Milk (KMR) as they cannot digest other types of milk (i.e. cow, goat) and it will cause diarrhea.
- Kittens at this age are not adoptable. Unless a shelter has a free foster home (highly unlikely) which can provide this round-the-clock care, they will not accept kittens at this age, ESPECIALLY without the mother.

If you can catch the mother

- Ideally, if you feel compelled to take the kittens out of their situation at this age, you will be able to take the mother in as well. Mother cats can relieve the responsibility of bottle feeding and can help groom as well as manage the kittens.
- The most important thing you can do is get the mother spayed so she doesn't get pregnant again. She can be spayed safely while still nursing her kittens and she can also get pregnant while nursing her kittens, so don't wait too long to have the surgery done.
- Good resources for spay services are the Animal Shelter Alliance of Portland (ASAP) www.asapmetro.org and the Multnomah Co. Animal Services <http://multcopets.org/if-you-find-kittens>. Also the Cat Adoption Team (CAT) has a huge network of kitten foster homes.
- Mother cats are often dumped with their litters when the previous owner feels overwhelmed. In this case, she will likely be adoptable. Always be sure to check for a microchip (all veterinary clinics and shelters should have a detector and are almost always willing to check for free), as finding the previous owner may be possible. A feral mother, on the other hand, may need to be re-released (AFTER her spay) once her kittens have been weaned.

Kittens 5-8 weeks and older

- If the kittens are 5-6 weeks old and can eat on their own, you must decide either to keep them as your own pets or find them homes on your own. You can also take the kittens to a shelter but remember that the kittens must be friendly in order to get into a shelter and be adopted and that the wait-list could be several weeks long.
- **5-weeks is the age at which kittens begin socialization.** This is a crucial time which can determine whether or not the kittens will be adoptable. Many organizations do not recommend attempting to socialize cats 4 months (16 weeks) and older. Cats at this age should be spayed/neutered and returned to their colony.

- Begin looking into spay/neuter options for the kittens immediately. Remember that cats can get pregnant as young as 5 months old (and will breed with litter mates) so don't wait until they look like adult cats. Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon spays and neuters cats as young as 2 months old, as do many other spay/neuter organizations. **Even if you don't plan on keeping the kittens, get them spayed or neutered before finding them a new home.**
- Deciding to take the kittens into your home means you are offering to take responsibility for them. This includes providing adequate care in your home or until they can find another responsible home. The next best option is to get the cats to an animal rescue organization, take them to a shelter or try to find homes for the cats with your friends and family.
- Look up options in your area online or call a local shelter to find out what your options are. Animal Aid has re-homing resources as well as a list of local shelters, but generally does not take in owner-surrender or kittens. Animal Aid also has resources for low-cost spay/neuter, as well as coupons for spay/neuter services and vaccinations in the local area.

**Information gathered from Multnomah County Animal Services, Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon, & Alley Cat Allies websites. Revised May 2014