



## Harmful, Non-Productive Suckling in Orphaned Neonatal Kittens

The suckling reflex is a natural reflex in kittens. It disappears between 25-28 days of age. In a natural situation, during the first three weeks of life, a kitten can suckle on his/her mother just about whenever he/she wants. After about 3 weeks of age, the mother will begin to decrease nursing sessions - which encourages weaning. With bottle fed kittens, however, kittens do not have free access to their mother and as a consequence will look for a substitute - which may unfortunately be one of his/her litter mates.

In our experience, harmful, non-productive suckling behavior most commonly happens when kittens are orphaned at 2-3 weeks of age; and about 50% of orphaned kittens at this age will tend to suckle on each other. The behavior does not tend to happen if the kittens are orphaned before 2 weeks of age, likely because younger orphaned kittens may not have developed a habit of suckling on demand.

Another reason why harmful, non-productive suckling is more common in orphaned kittens is that they often have a mother cat caring for them prior to becoming orphaned. Since the mother cat had regularly cleaned the kittens to stimulate them to pee and poop, the orphaned kittens may not object to the harmful, non-productive suckling from their litter mates. The difference between the mother cat's cleaning and the kitten doing the harmful, non-productive suckling is the mother cat's cleaning is not traumatic.

Litter mates suckling on each other should be taken very seriously. Damaged tissue on a kitten being suckled on can be life-threatening, the genital area can get traumatized to the degree that a kitten is unable to pee. It is an emergency if a kitten is in a lot of pain and cannot be stimulated to pee.

### Typical Sites for Non-Productive Suckling

- The most common site is the genital area of both male and female kittens
- The ears and legs
- The fur and skin on the belly of fellow kittens
- Soft bedding and stuffed toys
- The skin of people

## Why this is a BIG concern for the kittens getting suckled on

- Its disruptive to their rest, which will cause them stress.
- It can cause significant tissue trauma, pain, and swelling to the genital area being suckled on.
- Male kittens can develop hardened, painful, swollen penises which can make it very difficult and painful for them to pee.
- When a kitten is unable to pee due to severe tissue trauma and swelling, this is an emergency! Trauma like this can happen quickly if the kitten doing the suckling has a strong suckle. Some kittens cannot recover due to the extent of tissue trauma and will need to be humanely euthanized.

## Why this is a concern for the kittens doing the suckling

- They can develop digestive upset from the inadvertent ingestion of pee and poop.

## Signs of harmful, non-productive suckling

- For the kittens being suckled on, their anogenital area and back legs will be wet between feedings. Remember that kittens need to be stimulated to pee, so they should be dry between feedings.
- You may see wet areas on their legs, ears or bellies. The wetness is from the suckler's saliva. Wet areas on the belly could also be due to another condition called a patent urachus, which is an emergency.
- A reduction in elimination when you try and stimulate orphaned kittens to pee and poop. This is because the harmful, non-productive suckling from their littermates stimulates the kittens to pee and poop.
- The kittens doing the suckling may have faces that are wet and smell like pee or poop.

## What You Can Do

- The best solution is temporary separation. This will stop the behavior 100%. This approach is strongly recommended to prevent any emergency from extensive tissue trauma to kittens being suckled on.
  - To do this, separated kittens should be given their own heat source such as a Snuggle Safe disc.
  - They can be separated into another small carrier or Rubbermaid container, or even a guinea pig cage (if you have one) for older kittens.



- It will be important to continue to provide kitten play time (or socialization) – you can do this by giving kittens 10-15 minutes of supervised interaction after feeding, then separate them again - by then they should be exhausted and ready for a nap.
- Harmful, non-productive suckling behavior usually stops after 7-10 days of separation (and the suckling reflex diminishes as they mature).
- An alternative to separating them (which is not as ideal) is that you can divide their required daily feeding volume into more frequent feedings. You would essentially be feeding them every 2 hours.
- For kittens being belly suckled, cover their bellies with tubular gauze.
- Ways to address non-productive suckling of bedding and toys include:
  - Enriching the kittens' environment
  - Redirecting the kittens' behavior with other toys such as a soaked rawhide, beef jerky, or food stuffed toys.
- If a kitten tends to suckle on fabrics - give the kitten a cotton towel when he/she is suckling fabric that you don't want him/her to suckle on.

