



Diarrhea in Kittens and Puppies

Persistent young kitten diarrhea is one of most challenging problems that foster programs face. While most cases of kitten diarrhea resolve within a week's time, others don't. It is not uncommon for a veterinarian to run multiple diagnostic tests without finding a cause, or to try different treatments without resolution of the diarrhea.

Sometimes the solution ends up being to let a kitten's diarrhea run its course, while continuing to provide any needed treatment and supportive care. This persistent diarrhea scenario does not seem to happen very often with puppies. Normally, the cause of a puppy's diarrhea is more easily identified, and it clears up quickly with the appropriate treatment.

It is helpful for foster caregivers to understand the difference between soft poop and diarrhea in young kittens and puppies, to be aware of common causes of diarrhea, to recognize when veterinary attention is needed, and to know what can be done at home to prevent or address diarrhea.

Normal Poop vs. Diarrhea

- Most young kittens and puppies tend to pass soft poop, which should not be confused with diarrhea. Their poop will become more firm like an adult's by the time they're 8 weeks old, or so.
- Kitten and puppy poop can vary from individual to individual as far as the frequency, consistency, and color. This is why it is helpful to chart each kitten's or puppy's poop. Even littermates can have variations in what's normal.
- Kittens and puppies who are nursing or bottle feeding usually have brownish yellow poop with a toothpaste consistency. It can sometimes be a darker brown, and this is not a cause for concern.
- Weaned kittens and puppies tend to have light to dark brown poop that is very moist but has a distinct shape.
- "Diarrhea" refers to poop that does not have any shape. It looks like pudding or is watery.
- Keep an eye out for abnormal poop color (i.e., blood-tinged, bloody, green).

Common Causes of Diarrhea

- Intestinal Parasites
 - The most common intestinal parasites are roundworms, hookworms, whipworms, tapeworms, coccidia, and giardia.
 - Some, like roundworms and tapeworms, can sometimes be seen in the poop without a microscope.
 - Others, like coccidia and giardia, are only visible with a microscope.
- Diet related
 - Diarrhea can be caused by overfeeding, which can happen with bottle babies as well.
 - Diet changes are a very common cause of diarrhea, especially when kittens and puppies are transitioning to solid food.
 - Low quality food should be avoided. Not only can it cause diarrhea, but it is often lacking in important nutrients.
 - Dietary indiscretion is very common in puppies who get into everything and love to chew! They eat things out of the garbage, and can swallow parts of toys. Don't forget to kitten or puppy-proof your home!
- Infectious Diseases
 - The most common are feline panleukopenia and canine parvovirus, both of which create an emergency situation for an animal shelter or rescue group. The shelter or rescue group will need to quickly take steps to prevent an outbreak, because these viruses are highly contagious and potentially fatal in kittens and puppies.
 - Fortunately, outbreaks do not happen often, but you should contact your foster manager immediately if your foster kitten or puppy is showing other symptoms -- like vomiting, not eating, or lethargy.
- Stress
 - Re-homing and weaning are both common causes of stress-related diarrhea.
 - Re-homing refers to a kitten or puppy entering a shelter or rescue, and then going to a new foster or adoptive home. Even the most well-run shelters can be stressful. And while going to a foster or adoptive home is ideal, it takes time for kittens and puppies to adjust to these changes.
 - Weaning can also be a bit upsetting. Even if kittens and puppies are removed from their mothers gradually over time, it is still a change that takes getting used to.



- Bottle-Feeding Related
 - Bottle-fed puppies and kittens can develop diarrhea from overfeeding, milk replacer that is too concentrated, an unclean bottle or nipple, sour milk, or a digestive system that has not yet adjusted to the milk replacer.
 - See the [Maddie's Kitten and Puppy Bottle Feeding Problems and Solutions](#).
- Medications
 - Antibiotics, like Clavamox, are the most common group of drugs that cause diarrhea.
 - Other medications that commonly cause diarrhea are anti-inflammatories and de-wormers. It is not uncommon for a kitten or puppy to pass worms and diarrhea for 1-2 days after a de-worming.

When to Contact the Foster Manager

- Kittens and puppies may have diarrhea that resolves quickly, even without any intervention. But in some instances, it is important to contact the foster manager.
- If kittens and puppies are between 0-4 weeks and have more than 1-2 episodes of diarrhea, this is an emergency. They can become dehydrated very quickly, and any level of dehydration at this age is a serious medical concern.
- For all kittens and puppies, you should contact the foster manager if:
 - Diarrhea does not resolve in 1-2 days.
 - Diarrhea becomes more frequent or the amount increases.
 - Diarrhea is watery, bloody, or contains worms or foreign bodies.
 - If any littermates have died.
 - If other concerning symptoms are seen (i.e., lethargy, vomiting, dehydration, or decreased appetite).
 - Don't hesitate to contact the foster manager if you have any other concerns or questions. It is better to be safe than sorry.

What Can Be Done at Home to Prevent Diarrhea

- Ensure High Quality Nutrition
 - For weaned kittens and puppies, select a food that is highly digestible and formulated for kittens or puppies. It should be approved by the Association of American Feed Control Officials as a complete and balanced diet for growth. Look for that AAFCO nutritional adequacy statement on the food label. Good choices are puppy and kitten food from manufacturers like Hill's®, Royal Canin®, Purina®, Iam's®.
 - For bottle babies, use a commercial brand kitten or puppy milk replacer.



- Avoid Overfeeding
 - For kittens and puppies eating solid food, follow the food label instructions for the total recommended amount of food per day, and split this up into 3-4 feedings per day.
 - For bottle babies, check out the following resources:
 - [Maddie’s How to Bottle Feed Kittens and Puppies](#)
 - [Maddie’s Kitten and Puppy Bottle Feeding Problems and Solutions](#)
 - [Maddie’s Kitten Bottle Feeding and Stomach Capacity Chart](#)
 - [Maddie’s Puppy Bottle Feeding and Stomach Capacity Chart](#)
- Avoid Diet Changes
 - Switching foods can upset the stomach and cause diarrhea.
 - See the [Maddie’s Transitioning Kittens and Puppies to Solid Food](#) to learn about what you should and shouldn’t do during the weaning process.
 - When first bringing a foster kitten or puppy home, feed the same food that the shelter or rescue was feeding. Any diet changes should be made gradually, over a week’s time.
- Avoid Stress
 - Not only can stress cause diarrhea, but it can make your foster pet more likely to become sick with an infectious disease.
 - Introductions to new people and pets should be done slowly.
 - Remember that some pets are shy and fearful and they will need at least a couple of weeks to settle in before they are ready to meet others.
 - Provide safe zones for your foster pet to retreat to, even after he or she has settled in.
 - Enrichment always helps reduce stress. Toys, exercise, and games are always a good idea.
- Give Probiotics
 - Probiotics are live bacteria that help prevent and clear up diarrhea.
 - Fortiflora®, Provable®, and BeneBac® Plus are some common brands of probiotics.
 - Important tip: Do not use yogurt! It contains too much calcium to be used as a probiotic, and most yogurt does not contain sufficient measurable bacteria to be considered a probiotic.
 - See the Maddie’s Probiotics Educational Handout.
 - See the [Maddie’s Giving Orphaned Kittens Probiotics](#).

What Can Be Done at Home to Address Diarrhea

- Give Probiotics
 - See the Give Probiotics section above



- Save A Poop Sample
 - Veterinary staff will need to examine and test it, especially if it contains worms or foreign bodies.
 - It should be as fresh as possible, preferably less than 12 hours old, but no more than 24.
 - The sample needs to be kept refrigerated until it can be brought to the shelter or rescue group.
 - It can be difficult to collect a poop sample when the diarrhea is on the watery side. Try to get as much solid as possible
- Encourage water intake
 - For foster kittens or puppies that have diarrhea but are not vomiting.
 - If he or she is eating solid food, feed watered-down canned food. With kittens, you can offer juice from a can of salmon or tuna, either by itself or mixed with canned food.
 - For bottle babies, temporarily dilute the milk replacer 50:50 with Pedialyte® for 24 hours.
- Daily Assessment
 - This will allow you to monitor whether your foster pet is getting better, worse, or staying the same. It is also important to monitor for additional symptoms like vomiting, not eating, or lethargy.
 - To learn more about how to monitor your foster pet for signs of illness or stress, check for dehydration, and what to do in an emergency, see the following resources:
 - Maddie’s Daily Assessment of Foster Pets
 - Maddie’s How to Check Foster Pets for Dehydration
 - Maddie’s Emergencies in Kittens and Puppies (0-4 weeks)
 - [Maddie’s Emergencies in Cats and Dogs \(5 weeks and older\)](#)
- Implement Bottle Feeding Related Solutions
 - If you have a bottle baby with diarrhea, you will need to implement bottle feeding related solutions, depending on the cause.
 - See the [Maddie’s Kitten and Puppy Bottle Feeding Problems and Solutions](#).
- Bathing/Environmental Decontamination
 - Bathing foster pets who have had a parasitic infection, and some types of viral infections, can be very useful. Doing so prevents something called “re-infection” while also helping to prevent the spread of disease to other pets.
 - Re-infection happens when a pet gets infected with the same parasite a second time after having already recovered from the first infection. This can occur if protozoan cysts, like coccidia or giardia, remain on the fur. Kittens or puppies can re-infect themselves while grooming.



- Re-infection does not happen with viruses, like canine parvovirus. But if virus particles remain on the fur of a puppy who's recovered from parvo, another puppy could be exposed and contract the disease. Bathing the pet removes infective virus particles from the fur.
- Cleaning and disinfecting the environment removes intestinal parasite cysts and infectious disease particles from the household. For instructions, see the [Maddie's Cleaning and Disinfection in Foster Homes](#) and [Preventing the Spread of Disease in Foster Homes](#).

