



Emergencies in Kittens and Puppies (0-4 weeks)

Seeing a very young kitten or puppy in pain or sick can be scary, especially if you are unsure whether the problem is an emergency or not. It is important to be aware of kitten and puppy survival rates, and to understand what the most common emergencies are in kittens and puppies between 0-4 weeks of age. You should know when to seek emergency veterinary care for kittens and puppies between 0-4 weeks of age, and what you can do to help them until emergency veterinary care can be obtained.

Kitten and Puppy Survival Rates

- It is upsetting when kittens and puppies die despite our best efforts. It is important to understand kitten and puppy survival rates and to be prepared for the possibility that not all kittens and puppies will survive, especially if they are between 0-4 weeks of age.
- Kittens and puppies under 12 weeks of age have been reported to have high mortality rates, ranging from 15% to 40%.
- The biggest determinants of natural kitten or puppy loss are low birth weight and poor growth rates. One study showed that 60% of low birth weight kittens failed to survive to weaning.
- Delay in seeking emergency veterinary care greatly reduces the chance of survival of kittens and puppies.

Common Kitten and Puppy Emergencies (0-4 weeks)

- Common emergencies in kittens and puppies who are 5 weeks of age or older are not the same as common emergencies in kittens and puppies who are between 0-4 weeks of age. For example, older kittens and puppies are more likely to swallow foreign objects and start choking, to have an accident and break a leg, to cut themselves on something and start bleeding, or to eat something toxic.
- The most common emergency in kittens and puppies between 0-4 weeks of age is “Fading Syndrome,” also known as “Fading Kitten Syndrome” or “Fading Puppy Syndrome.” It happens when kittens and puppies who are between 0-4 weeks of age rapidly decline in health and die, often for no apparent reason.



- A blood infection is the most common cause of “Fading Syndrome.” Orphaned kittens and puppies often do not receive their mother’s first milk (colostrum), which contains protective antibodies against infection. This causes the orphan kittens and puppies to be more susceptible to infections including upper respiratory infections, bacterial infections acquired through the umbilical stump, and viral infections. Common viral infections are feline panleukopenia virus and feline leukemia virus in kittens, and canine parvovirus and canine herpesvirus in puppies.
- Other causes of “Fading Syndrome” include maternal neglect, improper nutrition, dehydration, low body temperature, low blood sugar, birth defects, and intestinal parasites.
- Another common emergency in kittens and puppies between 0-4 weeks of age is severe flea infestation that causes blood loss, which can be fatal.

Common Kitten and Puppy Emergency Symptoms (0-4 weeks)

- Monitoring of kittens and puppies is critical for early detection of health problems and assessing the effectiveness of medical treatment. Monitoring includes daily tracking of body weight, appetite and physical activity, pooping and peeing, and any signs of illness.
- Daily monitoring of your foster kittens and puppies will help you recognize what is normal in your kittens and puppies, so that you are better able to detect the abnormal.
- The most common emergency symptoms in kittens and puppies between 0-4 weeks of age include:
 - **Difficult or labored breathing:** open mouth breathing, gasping for air, very noisy or raspy breathing, very fast breathing, abdomen moving more than chest in an effort to breathe.
 - **Severe lethargy:** barely moving, difficulty holding head up, lying flat out, not responsive.
 - **Fever or low body temperature:** The normal body temperature of a kitten or puppy varies by age. See the [Maddie’s® Kitten and Puppy \(0-4 weeks\) Temperature Chart](#).
 - **Dehydration:** For older kittens and puppies, as well as adult cats and dogs, the hydration status is often checked by picking up the skin between the shoulder blades and then letting it drop. If the skin snaps back quickly, it is an indication that the pet is probably well hydrated. However, the skin tent of very young kittens and puppies is unreliable because their skin has an increased water content and a decreased fat content compared to adults. Because of this, very young kittens and puppies can be very dehydrated and still not have a skin tent. A more reliable way to determine the hydration status of a kitten or puppy who is 0-4 weeks of age is to rub your finger on his or her gums. If the gums feel sticky, your kitten or puppy is most likely dehydrated. If the gums feel slippery and moist, it is likely that he or she is well hydrated, although it is not a guarantee. Very young kittens and puppies may not have sticky gums until they are very severely dehydrated. Another indicator of hydration



status for very young kittens and puppies is the color of their urine. They have an immature kidney function, so their pee is normally colorless and clear. So, when they are dehydrated, you may notice that the pee is darker yellow in color. Regardless of whether you are seeing signs of dehydration, you should assume that a very young foster kitten or puppy is dehydrated if he or she has diarrhea, vomiting, or a lack of liquid intake from not nursing.

- **Abnormal gum color:** blue or grey indicates lack of oxygen, dark red may indicate a blood infection, white indicates blood loss, yellow indicates a liver problem or a blood disorder.
- **Seizures:** muscle twitching or jerking of limbs, drooling, disorientation. In very young kittens and puppies, seizures are most commonly associated with low blood sugar.
- **Not nursing or not getting enough milk:** Signs that a kitten or puppy is not nursing or is not getting enough milk include: crying, crawling away from the mother cat (if there is one), harmful non-productive suckling on a littermate, weight loss, or lack of weight gain. The physical condition of kittens and puppies who are between 0-4 weeks of age can deteriorate very quickly, compared to older kittens and puppies, if they go for more than 6 hours without any nutrition. Their blood sugar can also become dangerously low, causing them to have seizures. Kittens and puppies who are not nursing or not getting enough milk and are between 0-4 weeks of age may need tube feeding to survive. Do not attempt tube feeding without proper veterinary training on how to do so.
- **Pain:** can be extremely hard to recognize in a kitten or puppy who is between 0-4 weeks of age and still undergoing physical and behavioral development. Crying is one way that a kitten or puppy between 0-4 weeks of age could indicate that he or she is painful, but keep in mind it could also indicate that he or she is not getting enough milk and is hungry.
- These common emergency symptoms are indications to seek veterinary emergency care immediately, but be aware that this is not a complete list of every emergency symptom you might see in a kitten or puppy between 0-4 weeks of age. If you are concerned, or if you are not sure whether it is an emergency, it is always better to be safe than sorry and contact your foster coordinator.

What You Can Do Until Emergency Veterinary Care is Obtained

- If your kitten or puppy has **difficult or labored breathing**, ensure a clear airway. Gently clean any nasal discharge off the nostrils with soft cotton squares or a soft wash cloth moistened with warm water. If you have an oxygen tank available, provide supplemental oxygen by holding the tube in front of your kitten's or puppy's nose.



- If your kitten or puppy has a **low body temperature**, initiate slow warming efforts. Warming up your kitten or puppy too fast can cause him or her to go into shock. A hot water bottle, Snuggle Safe® Disc, or rice packs are all good choices for getting your foster kitten or puppy warmed up.
- If your kitten or puppy is **not eating/nursing or seems lethargic**, it is possible that he or she has low blood sugar. Rub white corn syrup on your kitten or puppy's gums with a cotton swab to bring the blood sugar up. If you do not have any white corn syrup, maple syrup can be used.

