



Transitioning Kittens and Puppies to Solid Food

Some kittens and puppies will need more help with transitioning to solid food than others. The process is easier for those who have mothers to watch and mimic, compared to orphans, yet some of the runts of litters may need some extra assistance too. It is helpful to know when to begin the weaning process in foster kittens and puppies; how to select, prepare and offer the food; and how to ensure that the kittens and puppies are getting adequate nutrition during the weaning process.

When to Begin the Weaning Process

- Kittens and puppies with mothers usually start to show an interest in solid foods around 4 weeks of age.
- The weaning process should start earlier in orphaned kittens and puppies, around 3 weeks of age. Even the best milk replacers tend to cause digestive problems such as diarrhea and constipation, and they are not as nutritionally complete as a mother's milk. It is best for orphans to transition to a more nutritionally complete solid kitten or puppy food as soon as possible.

Selection of the Food

- Throughout the weaning process, it is best to use the same high quality food that you plan to feed your kitten or puppy after weaning, to minimize diet changes. It should be highly digestible and approved by the Association of American Feed Control Officials as a complete and balanced diet for growth.
- Canned food selected should be of a smooth consistency without chunks. This makes it easier to mix it with water or milk replacer to form a gruel.
- Dry food should be small kibbles that are easy for a kitten or puppy to chew and are easily rehydrated with water to make a mushy consistency. If the kibbles are not already small and easy to chew, they can be crushed up into smaller pieces.
- Avoiding diet changes helps prevent digestive upset and/or diet rejection. For this reason, it is best not to use special weaning diets that are designed only for temporary use, such as "2nd step" milk replacer products.

- If the kittens and puppies will not eat the food that you plan to feed them after weaning, then it is acceptable to temporarily try adding Hill's® a/d®, Royal Canin® Recovery®, or human chicken baby food without onion or garlic.

Preparation of the Food

- When kittens and puppies are 3 to 4 ½ weeks old, they are just beginning the weaning process. At this time, it is best for solid food to be offered as a thick gruel. A good rule of the thumb is two parts canned food mixed with one part milk replacer or water, but this will vary depending on the thickness of the canned food. The gruel should be the consistency of oatmeal, neither too thick nor thin.
- It is best to avoid using milk replacer in gruels, except for babies who have been bottle fed whose stomachs are already used to the milk replacer.
- Once the kittens or puppies are readily consuming the gruel, start gradually cutting back on the amount of milk replacer or water added. Also, start offering fresh water in a shallow bowl. It is very important for the water intake to increase as the milk consumption decreases so that the kittens and puppies stay well hydrated.
- By the time kittens and puppies are 4 ½ to 6 weeks old, they are ready for dry food that has been moistened until it is a mushy consistency. A good balance would be one part dry food mixed with three parts of milk replacer or warm water, but it depends on the type of dry food and how easily it is rehydrated. Again, milk replacer is best avoided except for bottle fed babies whose stomachs are already used to it.
- At 6-8 weeks of age, kittens and puppies are usually completely weaned and eating solid foods on their own, canned and/or dry, without any milk replacer or water added. They should also be readily drinking water from a bowl at this age.

How to Offer the Food

- Transitioning kittens and puppies to solid food is a very messy process. Use tarps, sheets, or other protective floor covering. Even better, place the kittens or puppies in a bathtub or shower that is very easily rinsed out after feedings. Have plenty of soft washcloths and warm water available for wiping down tiny mouths and paws after feeding.
- Early in the weaning process, it is best to offer the food in a shallow saucer, a flat dish, or on a cookie sheet, until the kitten or puppy understands what solid food is. Kittens and puppies often learn to eat solids by first stepping in their food and then licking it off their paws.
- Sometimes it helps to use your finger to place some of the gruel on the kitten's or puppy's lips or tongue, or to syringe feed a small amount of it. Getting a tiny taste of the food is sometimes all



that is needed to get them started. This is especially true of orphans who can't learn from watching their mothers eat.

- If syringe feeding, use caution. Be sure to only place a very small amount of the gruel on the tongue, do not place it too far back into the mouth, and allow time for swallowing. Otherwise the kitten or puppy could inhale, that is, aspirate, the food.
- Later in the weaning process, after the kittens and puppies have figured out how to eat solid food, bowls with shallow sides are best. Multiple bowls are a good idea for litters, to avoid crowding and ensure that everyone has ample access to the food.
- Milk replacer, gruel or canned food mixtures should be warmed up before feeding. This will make the food more enticing, especially for kittens who tend to be pickier than puppies about the temperature of their food.
- Offer food for 30 minutes, 4 times per day. Any leftover milk replacer, gruel, canned food mixtures, or moistened dry food should be discarded. Otherwise it becomes dry, hard, unpalatable, and/or spoiled.
- Once kittens and puppies are eating non-moistened dry food, it can be left out all day for them to nibble on whenever they get hungry. Large breed puppies are an exception in that they should not be fed free choice, since this can cause abnormalities in their growing bones.
- Probiotics such as Fortiflora® help the digestive system adjust to diet changes. They can easily be added to the food that the kittens and puppies are eating, once per day. Probiotics should be started at the beginning of the transition process, and continued for approximately 5 to 10 days.

Ensuring Adequate Nutrition

- It is very important to ensure adequate nutrition during the transition process. As messy as kittens and puppies are while learning to eat solid foods, it is difficult to tell how much solid food each of them has actually eaten, especially with litters.
- Do not completely discontinue bottle feeding nor prevent kittens or puppies from nursing from their mothers until you are sure that they are fully transitioned to solid food. This usually happens by the time they are 6 to 8 weeks of age. After offering solid food, offer a bottle or give them access to the mother to nurse off of, in case they did not get enough food and are still hungry. Be patient, the transition process usually takes a few weeks to complete.
- Kittens and puppies should be weighed daily, and closely monitored for weight loss or lack of weight gain. Kittens who are eating enough should be gaining 4 oz. per week, or 0.6 oz. per day. Puppies who are eating enough should be gaining 5-10% of their body weight per day, resulting in doubling their body weight every 10-14 days.

