

# WHAT TO DO (AND NOT DO) WHEN YOU FIND MOTHERLESS KITTENS

**I have found kittens. Now what?**

**Where's Mom?** The mother cat usually remains continuously with newborn kittens for one or two days after giving birth. She may then leave the 'nest' for short periods. Also, a mother cat will often pick up and move her litter to a new location, especially during the first few weeks after birth. Establishing a new nest is part of the cat's instinctual behavior to safeguard her young by not remaining in one place too long.



**What to do?** When you find small kittens without a mother cat present, the mother may simply be away hunting for food or may be moving the kittens, one by one, to or from the place you found them. In other words, don't immediately assume the kittens are orphans. Observe the nest to see that the mother returns soon; observe quietly from a safe distance if dealing with a shy or feral mother.

It is important to know that it might take several hours for the mother cat to return, and healthy kittens can survive this period without food as long as they are warm. *Neonatal kittens are much more at risk of hypothermia than they are of starvation.*

**The goal here is to do what is best for the mother and her litter** -- and it is best to keep a mother together with her kittens, not for emotional reasons but for the best chance of survival. Not only is hand-raising a young, "prewean" kitten an intensive round-the-clock job, but also the mortality rate for these young kittens separated from their mothers is much higher than if they had been kept together.

Remember that if you encounter a lone kitten, mom may be moving the kittens, and the lone kitten could be either the first to be moved to the new location, or the last to be moved from the old.



**If the mother cat returns...** and the area is relatively safe, leave the kittens alone with mom until they are weaned. You can offer a shelter and regular food to mom, but keep the food and shelter at a distance from each other. Mom will find the food but will not accept your shelter if the food is nearby, because she will not want to attract other cats to food located near her nest.

If you must trap the mother before the kittens are weaned then collect ALL of her kittens as well. A shelter *may* be able to take the whole family. When the kittens are weaned the mother will be spayed and returned to her territory. If her

kittens are social and healthy they may be put up for adoption. If you trap the mother without her kittens be sure to alert the spay clinic or shelter that the mother is **lactating and must be spayed and returned immediately** to reunite with her kittens.

Six weeks is the optimal age to take the kittens from the mother for socialization and adoption placement, and any time after eight weeks for Trap-Neuter-Return (spay/neuter, vaccination, eartip, and return to their colony). Female cats can become pregnant with a new litter even while they are still nursing, so *don't forget to get the mother cat spayed* or you will have more kittens soon!

We want you to be able to help these kittens reach a happy, healthy adulthood. But before acting, consider the information above and take a moment to ask yourself "**Are these kittens orphans?**"