

The National Kitten Coalition

Reasons Your Kitten May Not Nurse Well...and What To Do About Them



1. Kitten is dehydrated, hypothermic or hypoglycemic. Treat immediately before feeding.
2. Kitten is not hungry. This is especially true with new intakes of healthy kittens older than 2 weeks. If otherwise healthy, wait an hour and try again.
3. Formula/bottle/nipple are too cold or hot. Test the temperature on your wrist. It should feel slightly warm. Warm nipple as well as formula.
4. Formula doesn't taste good. Be sure the formula is fresh; <24 hours old, preferably <12 hours. Smell the powder in the can; should smell sweet, not rancid.
5. Nipple opening is not the right size. Use scissors or razor blade to cut. When held up-side-down, formula should drip out *slowly* with little or no pressure on bottle.
6. Kitten needs extra support. Feed in a prone position (on stomach) with head slightly raised. Place kitten on towels, warm rice sock, etc. Place fingers lightly on the cheeks and chin.
7. Bottle is too rigid. Kitten unable to suckle with enough force. Loosen the cap slightly to allow air in to replace the formula as kitten suckles. Tiny air bubbles should be visible rising in the bottle.
8. Kitten is not fully 'awake'. Very young kittens are more likely to nurse when 'asleep', but those >2 weeks old need to be 'awake'. Pet them, stimulate them before feeding.
9. Kitten needs to burp, defecate or urinate. Burp kittens after feeding and during 'feeding breaks'. Stimulate kittens in an upright position to urinate and/or defecate. Use soft toilet paper as it absorbs more than cotton balls.
10. Physical deformity (i.e. cleft palate) - hopefully noticed during intake exam. Depending on the situation, tube feeding may be an option until kitten is old enough for corrective surgery.
11. Illness, i.e. URI, Panleukopenia. Diagnosis and treatment ASAP. May need to tube or syringe feed.
12. Old enough to eat solids. Determine age of kitten and offer wet food. Some kittens skip wet food completely and go from the bottle to small, dry kibble, so offer both and plenty of clean water.
13. Kitten needs to learn what bottle is; squeeze just a tiny drop of formula onto tongue.

Additional Tips

- Use a warm, slightly damp washcloth to imitate mother's licking to clean kitten several times a day – especially after feeding and around the mouth and anal areas.
- Weigh the kitten at least once daily and keep accurate records of weight, food intake times and amounts, and elimination. Note also the color and consistency of urine and feces.
- Formula can be used as a vehicle for supplements like Nurti-Cal, L-lysine, Fort-Flora, etc. Do not put medications in the formula as the proper dose may not be consumed if the kitten doesn't eat well. Many medications will also negatively affect the taste of the formula making the kitten less willing to eat.
- Keep all supplies and the kitten's environment scrupulously clean.
- Feed a quality kitten milk replacer formula; do not feed 'Cat Milk' as it is intended only as a treat and does not have the nutrition or calories required for growing kittens.