

# Kitten Diarrhea – Causes, Symptoms and Treatment

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## Kitten diarrhea at a glance

- Common causes of diarrhea in kittens include dietary indiscretion, ingestion of toxins (plants, medications) parasites, change in diet, viral, bacterial, protozoal, hookworm and roundworm.
- Look out for accompanying symptoms such as vomiting, loss of appetite, lethargy or blood in the stool.
- Observe kittens at home for 24 hours if they appear otherwise well. If diarrhea persists longer than that, or if your cat is exhibiting other symptoms such as lethargy, if he has consumed a toxin, loss of appetite or blood in the stool, seek veterinary attention immediately. If possible, bring along a stool sample.

Preventing diarrhea:

- Introduce new foods slowly.
- Keep toxins, poisonous plants, medications out of reach of your kitten.
- Worm kittens every 2 weeks, from two weeks of age and vaccinate at 6-8 weeks.

Diarrhea is the passage of watery stools in kittens and cats. It is not a disease in itself, but a symptom of an underlying problem. It may be the only symptom or it may accompany other symptoms such as lethargy, vomiting, and loss of appetite.

Diarrhea in kittens one of the most common complaints seen by veterinarians. Their gastrointestinal system isn't fully developed and they are more sensitive to dietary changes, as their immune systems aren't yet fully developed they are also at greater risk of catching infections or diarrhea-causing parasites such as [coccidiosis](#).

Diarrhea can be acute or chronic. **Acute** is the sudden onset of frequent watery stools, **chronic** is diarrhea which has been present for more than three weeks.

## Causes:



There are many causes of diarrhea, some of which can be life-threatening. Kittens in shelters are at particular risk of infectious diarrhea, with common pathogens including feline panleukopenia, giardia, and coccidia. Diseases such as FIV and FeLV can weaken the immune system making affected kittens more vulnerable to other bacterial, viral, fungal or protozoal infections.

## Dietary

- **Sudden switch in your kitten's food** is a very common cause of diarrhea in kittens. Young cats, in particular, are very sensitive to dietary changes, so when you bring your new kitten home, find out from the breeder, or the previous owner what the kitten has been eating so far. He should continue to have the same diet, but if you would like to change to a different type or brand of food, you can do so, but introduce it gradually, over a period of days. On the first day 90% old food, 10% new food, second day 80% old food, 20% new food etc. This will slowly accustom your kitten to the new food without upsetting his tummy.
- **Overfeeding.** Kittens should be fed several small meals a day. Some kittens can develop an upset stomach if they are fed a large amount.
- **Food allergies and food intolerances.** Food allergies are an unlikely cause of diarrhea in kittens, which typically develop over time, however food intolerances such as giving them cow's milk may affect kittens.
- **Dietary indiscretion.** Eating something he shouldn't have such as cat litter, food from the garbage bin or toxic plants may cause diarrhea, especially in kittens who are generally less discerning than adult cats.
- **Cows milk** – Many new kitten owners think that [kittens should drink milk](#). This is a common cause of diarrhea in kittens as they are unable to digest the lactose in the milk. If you want to give your kitten milk, purchase the “*cat milk*” available from most supermarkets.

## Infection (bacterial, viral, protozoal)

Bacterial infections:

- **Salmonella** – A common bacterial infection which may be acquired via direct contact with an infected animal or prey, contaminated food or via objects such as food bowls.
- **Campylobacter** – A zoonotic bacterial infection which is seen most often in kittens under 6 months of age. Infection can be due to contact with an infected animal, water, feces, fomites (inanimate objects such as litter trays, toys etc), feces and raw meat, especially chicken.

- **E-coli** – A bacteria which commonly lives in the intestinal tract of animals without causing problems. There are many strains of e-coli, some of which are particularly pathogenic, causing disease.

## Viral infections:

- **Feline Immunodeficiency Virus** – This virus is similar to the HIV virus in humans, and as the name would suggest, the virus attacks the immune system, compromising the cat's ability to fight infection and making them vulnerable to infection from other pathogens. Bites are the most common mode of transmission. There is no cure for FIV although symptoms can be managed.
- **Feline leukemia virus** – In the same family as the virus responsible for FIV, feline leukemia virus (FeLV) is a viral infection that is transmitted via the saliva or respiratory secretions of an infected cat, during sexual intercourse, in utero, via the mother's milk, cat bites and from fomites. Infected cats have a compromised immune system making them vulnerable to secondary infection.
- **Feline panleukopenia** – A common viral infection caused which causes a low white blood cell count in cats which can lead to secondary infection. Between 25 – 75% of infected cats die. It is seen most often in kittens, although cats of any age can become infected. Transmission can be via the feces, urine, saliva or vomit of an infected cat or from fomites such as cat bowls and litter trays.
- Rotavirus

## Protozoal infections:

Protozoa are a group of single-celled organisms many of which cause intestinal disorders in the hosts they infect.

- **Giardia** is an extremely common cause of diarrhea with a prevalence of between 4 – 12% in cats and kittens. Cats become infected via exposure to an infective cyst shed in the feces of an animal with the parasite. This may be via eating or sniffing the feces of an infected animal or drinking contaminated water. The parasite infects the small intestine, producing voluminous, pale coloured and foul-smelling diarrhea but doesn't contain blood or mucus. Giardia doesn't generally cause loss of appetite or vomiting.
- **Cryptosporidium** a common cause of diarrhea in kittens and cats, this infection is similar to giardia in which cats become infected via ingestion of an infected cyst shed by a cat carrying the parasite.
- **Coccidiosis** is another protozoal infection of the intestinal tract which is acquired via direct contact with infected cysts. Kittens are particularly vulnerable to infection due to their immature immune systems.
- *Tritrichomonas fetus* is a recently identified protozoal infection which is sometimes misdiagnosed as giardia. It affects the colon and end of the small intestine (distal ileum), infection occurs via direct contact with infected feces. Kittens, particularly those in shelters and crowded catteries are most at risk of infection. Diarrhea may come and go, it may contain blood and/or mucus.

Protozoal infections in cats have the potential to be passed on to other pets as well as people in the house. So great care must be taken when caring for infected cats.

## Parasites

- **Hookworms** are small, thin parasites which live in the small intestine of cats where they attach themselves to the intestinal wall and feed on blood and tissue. Kittens most commonly become infected either in utero or via their mother's milk. Black and bloody diarrhea can occur due to bleeding in the intestines, stunted growth and anemia may also develop.
- **Roundworms** There are two species of spaghetti-like roundworm to infect cats, both of which live primarily in the small intestine, feeding on the intestinal contents. Kittens usually become infected via their mother's milk or the environment, although infection can also be acquired via hunting. Affected kittens often have a characteristic pot-bellied appearance as well as diarrhea, vomiting, which may contain worms, failure to grow and poor coat condition.

## Other

- **Heat stroke** – Kittens are not as efficient at maintaining their body temperature as adult cats, and can quickly become overheated as a result.
- **Poisoning** – Kittens can be especially indiscriminate when it comes to what they put in their mouth. Antifreeze, plants, medications etc.
- **Intestinal blockage** (cooked bones, cat litter, wool, clothing etc), this will often also be accompanied by vomiting.
- **Stress** – Moving to a new house can be stressful to a kitten.
- **Fading kitten syndrome** – This occurs in very young kittens in the first two weeks of their life who appear otherwise healthy and suddenly become very sick and die. The cause may be a congenital defect, infection, maternal neglect, blood type incompatibility, environmental conditions (too hot, too cold). There are many possible causes.

## Diagnosis:

If the kitten appears to be well, is eating, drinking and playing as normal, you may choose a wait and see approach. In the meantime, put him on a bland diet such as boiled chicken or Hills I/D (intestinal diet) to give his stomach a rest.

Kittens who have had diarrhea for **longer than 24 hours** need to see a veterinarian. Diarrhea in kittens can be serious as they dehydrate much faster than adult cats. You should see your veterinarian without delay if the diarrhea is accompanied by the following symptoms:

- **Dehydration**
- Blood in the diarrhea
- Mucus in the diarrhea
- **Fever**
- Foul smelling and/or frothy diarrhea
- **Loss of appetite**
- **Lethargy**
- **Pain**
- **Vomiting**

If possible, bring a stool sample to the vet with you, this can help to diagnose the problem.

Your veterinarian will perform a complete physical examination of your kitten and obtain a medical history from you. Questions he may ask may include:

What food has the kitten eaten recently?

Accompanying symptoms?

How old is the kitten?

Is he up to date on his vaccinations?

Where did he come from?

Does he receive regular flea and worm treatments?

## Diagnostic tests:

- **Fecal examination, culture, and flotation** to look for worms, worm eggs, bacteria and cysts in the feces.
- **Baseline tests** including complete blood count and biochemical profile to check for an underlying infection, dehydration, and anemia.
- **Urinalysis** to check the kidney function and to determine how dehydrated your kitten is.
- **X-Rays** to look for intestinal blockages and evaluate the organs such as liver and kidneys.

Additional tests may be necessary depending on your veterinarian's index of suspicion.

## Treatment:

### Treating the cause of kitten diarrhea:

- **Anti-worming medication** to kill parasitic worms. There are a number of products on the market to treat worms in cats. More information can be found [here](#).
- **Anti-parasitic medications** to treat protozoal infections. Common medications include Metronidazole (Flagyl) and Furazolidone (Furoxone).
- **Antibiotics** for bacterial infections.
- **Symptomatic and supportive care** for viral infections while your kitten's own immune system fights off the infection. Your veterinarian may also prescribe antibiotics in this case which won't kill the virus but may hold off secondary bacterial infections which can sometimes develop.
- **Anti-diarrhea medications** to relieve symptoms and prevent further fluid loss via the feces.
- **Surgery** to remove gastrointestinal obstruction.
- **FIV and FeLV** – There is no cure for these two viral infections and treatment is aimed at managing symptoms and preventing opportunistic infections. Anti-viral drugs such as AZT may be prescribed. Regular veterinary visits to monitor your cat's health. Stay up to date on treatments. Feed a high-quality diet. Blood transfusion may be necessary for cats with late-stage FIV.
- **Panleukopenia** – Treatment of symptoms such as blood transfusions, fluids, and antibiotics to fight off secondary infections.

### Managing symptoms:

- **Withhold food:** If the diarrhea is acute, and he seems otherwise well, your veterinarian may choose to withhold food for 12-24 hours (for kittens that are over 8 weeks of age). Water is still to be provided.
- **Bland diet:** Either after the fasting period or in place of, food that is bland and low fat should be fed for a few more days. Poached chicken breast is gentle on the stomach.
- **Supportive care** may be necessary while your kitten recovers from diarrhea. Treat dehydration and electrolyte imbalance if necessary. This may involve a short stay at the vet on an IV drip or he may choose to give your kitten some fluids subcutaneously (via injection under the skin). Nutritional support if your kitten isn't eating.

### Aftercare:

Administer all medications as prescribed by your veterinarian.

If you plan to change your kitten's diet, do so gradually as they have very sensitive stomachs. Avoid giving your kitten cow's milk.

Disinfect food bowls, floors, litter trays and bedding to kill pathogens. Keep food and water bowls away from litter trays.

## Prevention:

- Only give fresh, clean drinking water to your cat. Do not allow them to drink from potentially contaminated sources.
- If you are feeding a raw diet, only feed human grade raw meat and store properly. Discard uneaten raw or canned food after 30 minutes.
- Don't give kittens food which is past its use by date.
- Make sure you follow your kittens' [vaccination schedule](#).
- [Worm](#) your kitten regularly.
- Treat your cat regularly for fleas. Fleas are capable of [transmitting a number of diseases](#) including tapeworm, plague, feline infectious anemia and cat scratch disease.
- Kittens are extremely curious and anything they can put in their mouth they will do so. Kitten-proof your home.
- Keep all medications in a locked cupboard.
- Slowly transition kittens to new food to avoid stomach upset from new foods.
- Kitten-proof your home. A kitten is very similar to a toddler, they can get into a lot of trouble in very little time. Store medications, household products, poisons and small objects your cat can easily swallow away from kittens.