



Diarrhea Protocol for Foster Kittens

Purpose

Describe organizational practices for diagnosis, management, and treatment of diarrhea in kittens.

Goal

Prompt identification and response to diarrhea in foster kittens is necessary to prevent systemic dehydration and illness. Most bouts of diarrhea will resolve with time and supportive care, but severe or prolonged diarrhea requires medical attention. If left unaddressed, severe diarrhea in kittens can cause dehydration, hypothermia, lethargy, and hypoglycemia.

Causes

- Endoparasites
- Diet change
- Stress
- Overfeeding
- Under-developed GI systems
- Antibiotic therapy
- Recent surgery
- Infectious or inflammatory diseases, including viral and bacterial infections

Prevention

- Wear gloves in between handling diarrhea patients.
- Handle healthy animals before handling diarrhea patients.
- Maintain a low-stress environment.
- Feed a consistent and healthy diet.
- Provide prophylactic endoparasite treatment.

Recognition & Diagnosis

- **Normal:** A fecal score (FS) of 4 is the ideal but it is normal for kittens to have FS 5, which will appear soft-formed and pasty, particular at the beginning of foster as they transition to a different diet and their gastrointestinal systems continue to develop.
- **Diarrhea:** FS 6-7 are considered diarrhea in kittens.
- **Acute diarrhea:** Diarrhea that lasts less than 14 days.
- **Chronic diarrhea:** Diarrhea that lasts more than 14 days.
- Initial diagnosis will be made via **clinical** signs:
 - FS 6-7

- Increased frequency or volume of defecation, straining to defecate
- Soft to liquid stool, with or without the presence of blood or mucus
- Pasty, light colored stool
- Loss of control of defecation, leaking feces
- Test for panleukopenia in kittens that initially present with diarrhea and systemic illness or kittens with severe diarrhea, regardless of systemic clinical signs.
 - If test is positive, refer to program veterinarian for treatment.
 - If test is negative but patient is highly suspicious for panleukopenia, run a CBC.
 - If test is negative, follow treatment protocol below.
- In refractory cases, fecal sample can be run in-house (float and direct smear) or sent out to a lab for analysis (float and direct smear +/- PCR panel).

Treatment

General Management for Foster Parents

- Assess general health and preventive management practices:
 - Check weight trends.
 - Ensure prophylactic deworming and vaccination schedules are up to date.
- Discuss possibility of overfeeding and potential contribution of stress:
 - Fosters are feeding small amounts of appropriate food multiple times per day instead of large amounts once or twice per day.
 - Ensure hide boxes and areas for perching are provided for all cats, ensure animals are being fed separately to prevent food-related stress, ensure enough litterboxes are present.

Management of Mild Diarrhea in Otherwise Healthy Patients

- Mild cases include loose stool (FS 5) but patients are bright and responsive, have a healthy body condition, are eating well, are hydrated, and are gaining weight.
- If patient remains healthy but fecal score does not improve within 7 days, schedule appointment with veterinarian.

Scenarios in which Evaluation by a Veterinarian is Warranted

- Diarrhea with little to no appetite for over 24 hours, lethargy, or persistent vomiting
- Severe diarrhea (FS 7) and fecal incontinence
- Severe diarrhea (FS 7) for more than 12 hours
- Bloody diarrhea
- Diarrhea (FS 6) that persists over 2 days in conjunction with other clinical signs such as weight loss, inappetence, or lethargy
- Kitten is not gaining weight or starts losing weight for 2 days
- Kitten is overtly dehydrated (sunken eyes, prolonged skin tent, pale mucus membranes)

Management of Sick Patients

Kittens that present with diarrhea and are clinically ill should be treated aggressively due to the risk of rapid clinical decline related to dehydration.

- Clinical signs may include:
 - Weight loss or failure to gain weight for 2 days
 - Poor body condition

- Quiet, depressed
- Dehydration
- Poor appetite
- Blood in stool
- Vomiting
- Keep the kitten's hind end clean and dry; this may require bathing/rinsing of the hind end and can require shaving of long hair that traps loose feces.
 - Apply a diaper rash cream/ointment as needed under direction of veterinarian.

Treatment

The use of prescription medications must be under the direction and monitoring of a veterinarian.

- Oral liquid fenbendazole
- Oral liquid ponazuril
 - It is safe and acceptable to re-dose this medication if a patient presents with diarrhea even if the patient received ponazuril at intake only a few days prior.
 - Use in any patients with pasty, pale stool.
 - Provide disposable litterboxes to change 1-2x/daily to prevent reinfection with Coccidia.
- Appropriate antibiotics as directed by a veterinarian.
- Administer a daily probiotic for duration of treatment.
- If dehydrated, administer warmed crystalloid fluids subcutaneously as directed by the program's veterinarian.
- Foster team member should follow up with foster parent 2 and 5 days after the initial appointment to determine if patient is improving.
 - If diarrhea has not improved in 7 days with the above treatment or patients have blood in stool or are losing weight, schedule a recheck veterinary appointment.

Refractory Cases/Chronic Diarrhea (Over 14 Days)

- Reassessment by veterinarian required.
- Perform an FeLV test on any patient with chronic/refractory disease.
 - If positive, ensure patient has been thoroughly examined for signs of active FeLV infection.
- Re-dose ponazuril if longer than 10-14 days since last dose.
- Send out fecal sample to a lab for analysis (float and direct smear +/- PCR panel).
- Switch to a low fat, high protein (e.g. Hills i/d, Royal Canin High Energy) according to program veterinary preference for 2 weeks.
 - If no improvement after 2 weeks, consider:
 - Adding 1 TBSP pumpkin twice daily for bulk
 - Switch to a hypoallergenic diet, particularly if patient also has dermatologic clinical signs, which may indicate a food intolerance/sensitivity.
- Contact the program veterinarian to determine most appropriate next steps, to review past treatments and any additional diagnostics performed, and to ensure that patient's stay in foster care is not prolonged.

Follow Up / Discharge

- Ensure foster families understand the importance of:
 - Not overfeeding kittens.

- Keeping the hind end as clean as possible to prevent irritation to the surrounding skin and matting of the fur.
- Using prescribed treatments and administering medications.
- Ensure follow up call and patient update in 2 days.

Additional Resources

[Purina Fecal Scoring Chart](#)

Webinar: [Feline Panleukopenia: The Basics](#)

[Research on Kitten Death in Shelters and Rescues](#)