

Animal Rescue League of Iowa

Cat Foster Care Manual

2022

Our Foster Mission:

At the Animal Rescue League of Iowa, we know that lives are changed when people and animals come together. Many of those animals come to us broken in body and spirit. Our Mission is to make them healthy again, restore their trust in humans, and find them homes.

Providing young animals with opportunities to mature, sick or injured animals with opportunities to heal and un-socialized animals with the opportunities to develop trust in people away from the stress of the shelter environment, can often make the difference between success and failure.

Fostering is demanding work, both physically and emotionally. This manual is designed to help you deal with these challenges. We welcome your questions and comments regarding ways we might support you better. We look forward to working with you to provide happy endings for more and more animals.

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Who to Call

When it comes to animals, there are no silly questions. Please don't hesitate to ask. Call or e-mail us. (Email is the PREFERRED form of communication for non-emergency situations.)

For any questions related to your foster pet, your best first step is to email the ARL Foster Department. You can email Foster Supervisor, Amy Kopatich, at akopatich@arl-iowa.org or Foster Assistant, Tristan Haag, at thaag@arl-iowa.org. This dedicated team will point you in the right direction.

Once animals leave the shelter and enter foster care, they generally need to remain in foster care until approved by either the shelter veterinarian or medical staff. Please do not return your foster pet to the shelter without first coordinating with the foster department. This step assures proper record keeping, continuation of appropriate care, and allows our teams to be prepared for their arrival back to the shelter.

Selection of foster caregivers:

- All foster caregivers must complete a foster care application that will help the coordinator match foster caregivers with the appropriate animal for their lifestyle.
- All foster caregivers must sign the foster agreement and be capable of meeting the qualifications, duties, and time requirements.
- Foster caregivers should feel free to say no if they feel ill-equipped to deal with a particular situation if the time requirement is not convenient.
- Foster caregivers must be aware that the animals placed in foster care may be considered to be high risk. Sometimes, animals will not thrive and may die despite any life-saving measures attempted.
- Foster caregivers will be eligible for basic supplies such as cat collars, toys, crates, treats and food if the shelter has supplies in stock. Please note that supplies are donation based. If we do not have it on hand, we will be unable to supply our fosters with those specific supplies. Your foster coordinators will be responsible for communicating this with you.
- Foster caregivers will receive any special food and all medications will be provided to them.
- Foster caregivers will understand that even with a complete and thorough check-in, foster animals may be placed in a foster home while still harboring unknown illnesses or parasites. Foster caregivers will understand that they are exposing their resident pets at their own risk.

Selection of Animals to be Fostered:

The Animal Rescue League of Iowa's Foster Program is designed to serve at-risk animals that have a better chance of preparing for adoption away from the stress of the shelter environment.

- Animals are approved for foster by the ARL's Medical Department, Behavior Department, and Foster Department.
- All attempts are made to determine the behavior status of the animal prior to leaving the shelter.
- All attempts are made to determine the health status of the animal prior to leaving the shelter.
- Animals are vaccinated, de-wormed and vet checked when applicable prior to placement in foster care.
- No animals known to be "dangerous" will be fostered.
- Animals with known contagious diseases or behavior issues are fostered only with full disclosure to the caregiver.

Animals to be fostered (including, but not limited to):

- Sick cats
- Injured kittens and cats recovering from or awaiting reparative surgery
- Juvenile kittens (under 9 months of age)
- Neonate kittens requiring bottle feeding and constant care
- A mother cat with a litter of nursing kittens
- Shy or un-socialized cats and kittens
- Cats in the crisis care program
- Any cat that may need respite from the shelter due to stress or length of stay

Basic Care

- *Neonate Kittens*

Kittens are unable to eat soft or solid food until at least 3 weeks of age as this is when their teeth come in. Until at least this time, neonate kittens need to be bottle fed formula every 2-4 hours, depending on age and size (SEE NEONATE KITTEN HANDOUT IN BI). At or around 3 weeks of age, when teeth are felt to be coming in, the caregiver may start to transition from formula to gruel (SEE GRUEL RECIPE HANDOUT IN BI). Once successfully transitioned to gruel, neonate kittens are considered weaned. Every kitten is an individual and will wean on a different schedule.

- ***Weaned Kittens***

Once kittens have begun eating gruel as their sole form of food, they should be fed 3-4 times a day. Thicken gruel gradually. Introduce dry food and water at this time as well. By 6 weeks, kittens should be eating dry food well. Feed kittens of this age at least 3 meals daily. When fostering multiple kittens, it is a good idea to offer multiple food and water bowls in their pen or room. Litter training should start at 3-4 weeks. Once kittens are 8 weeks old, in good condition, and healthy, a time will be scheduled for you to bring your foster kitten(s) in for their final appointment to be dropped off for their spay or neuter surgery. Kittens under 8 weeks of age will use only non-clumping litter. This is non-negotiable as sometimes young kittens eat their litter which can be extremely dangerous if it is a clumping variety.

- ***Mother Cat and Kittens***

Nursing mother cats should be fed a high quality and appropriate amount of kitten food throughout the duration of their time lactating. She will also require access to plenty of water at all times. As with kittens, each mother is very different and will need to be cared for accordingly. When babies are under 4 weeks old, if the mother will allow, be sure to observe the kittens nursing to ensure she is allowing them to nurse and they are latching during this time. Activity and consistent crying from the babies may indicate a problem with the mother's milk flow, quality, or availability. Healthy kittens being raised by a mother cat seldom cry. Around 3 weeks, mom will begin spending more time out of her nest as the kittens begin to move around more. This is a good time to introduce gruel to the kittens (SEE GRUEL HANDOUT IN BI). By 5 weeks, the mother cat is unable to supply her kittens with the total nutrient intake they require. You will want to ensure the kittens are still gaining weight by keeping a record of their weight. It is also important to make sure the kittens have access to fresh water in a low, stable bowl. (SEE MOM AND KITTENS HANDOUT IN BI).

- ***Adult Cats***

When your foster cat arrives at your home, they will need to be kept in a single room when you are at work or away from your home. Fosters should NEVER be left unattended in the presence of resident pets. (SEE SANCTUARY SPACE HANDOUT IN BI). Try not to overwhelm your foster cat with too much in the first few days. Keep the visitors to a minimum and give the cat time to adjust to you before meeting everyone you know. Take any introductions to resident pets in the home very slowly. (SEE INTRODUCING YOUR CAT TO OTHER CAT AND INTRODUCING YOUR CAT TO DOGS HANDOUTS IN BI). As a general rule, children under 12 years of age should not be left alone and unsupervised with a cat. Unless specified, the brand or type of food is at the discretion of the foster parents. Keep in mind that a food changes too quickly or the diet may cause loose stools or diarrhea. The shelter feeds a mixture of foods but primarily Hill's Science Diet products. The amount fed will be determined by the age and size of your foster cat. Unless directed differently by your foster coordinators or the ARL medical team, adult cats should be fed once or twice daily. Fresh water should be available at all times. The ARL can never guarantee that a cat is litter trained, however we do have resources available to assist while you work through this with your foster pet. (SEE THE LITTER BOX HANDOUT IN BI).

Common Diseases and Ailments

- *Diarrhea*

Diarrhea is common in kittens especially. In cats and kittens, it can be caused by parasites, viruses, bacteria, food changes, stress, overfeeding, and more. If the diarrhea is mild and the kitten or cat is otherwise alert and playful, you can try giving it less food but more often. If the diarrhea is severe, lasts more than 3 or 4 feedings, or contains blood or obvious parasites, you should email your foster coordinators and prepare to drop off a fecal sample in a Ziploc bag. The ARL's medical team and veterinary staff will assist in determining the cause of the diarrhea and treating it at that time.

- *Fading kittens*

Once in a while, one or more kittens in a litter that were healthy and vigorous at birth will begin to “fade” after a week or two of life. They will stop growing, begin to lose weight, stop nursing, and become less alert. They may cry continuously and lose the ability to stay upright. The mother may even push them out of the nest where they often chill. Kittens fade very quickly and will likely not last 48 hours without veterinary care, and many will not recover even with intensive care. * Often there is no clear cause or reason for this condition—it has been linked to birth defects, environmental stress and infectious disease. Early veterinary treatment is imperative, but even when intensive life saving measures are taken, many, if not most, fading kittens will die. *

- *Ringworm*

Ringworm is caused by a fungus, related to athlete's foot. On people and cats, ringworm is most often shaped in a regular ring. The cat's fur will fall out, leaving a round bare spot with a visible ring. Ringworm causes little distress and is not an emergency, but it is contagious to cats, dogs, and people. If you or your pets contract ringworm, you will need to seek treatment from your doctor and veterinarian (respectively). Everything the cat has touched while in your home will need to be disinfected with a bleach solution (at least 1 part bleach to 10 parts water) for at least one hour contact time, as ringworm spores can easily spread among other cats and re-infect their hosts. Speak with your foster coordinators for further instruction. * If ringworm condition is confirmed, your home may be quarantined for 6 months in order to prevent continued contaminations. *

- *Kitty Cold (Upper Respiratory Infection/URI)*

Cats are at risk for a fairly common respiratory infection known as kitty cold. This is stress induced and very contagious to other felines. Kitty cold is only transmissible between cats. Kitty cold often presents much like the common cold humans would get. Kitty cold symptoms include, but are not limited to: coughing, sneezing, runny nose, watery eyes, and congestion. As a general rule, when nasal discharge is clear your cat's cold is currently in the viral phase. We are unable to treat viruses with antibiotics. When the nasal discharge is yellow or green in color, your cat's cold is now in its bacterial phase. Our medical team is able to prescribe antibiotics for your foster cat at this time. Contact your foster coordinator for guidance in the event you feel your foster cat has a kitty cold.

- *Vomiting*

If your foster kitten or cat is vomiting, it is possible that the animal is eating their meals too quickly. You should watch them when they eat and not allow them to eat too much too quickly. If your foster cat vomits 2-3 times in row, please email your foster coordinators for further instructions.

- *Fleas*

Your foster cat or kitten (if old enough) will have been flea treated prior to going to foster. If you see any signs of live fleas on your foster cat or kitten, contact your foster coordinators promptly. You may see signs of dead fleas that are remnants of the flea treatment taking effect.

- ***Feline Panleukopenia (Panleuk)***

Panleukopenia is a parvovirus much like that in canines. It is highly contagious and often extremely resistant to disinfectants and temperature extremes. Panleuk attacks and destroys white blood cells, in turn weakening the immune system and putting the cat or kitten at risk for secondary infections. Unvaccinated kittens are at the highest risk of contracting this disease. Symptoms of panleuk include: lethargy, vomiting, diarrhea, and dehydration. If you are concerned that your foster animal may be showing signs of panleuk, contact your foster coordinator immediately to schedule a medical appointment with our team.

* If panleuk condition is confirmed, your home may be quarantined for 6 months in order to prevent continued contamination. *

When to contact the foster department:

Contact the foster department in regards to any care related to foster pet(s). Contact your foster coordinators if you have questions regarding health, needing more medication, need to schedule return, vaccinations, etc. Your foster animals should never be taken to the shelter without a pre-scheduled appointment time. Please be aware that the medical department runs off of scheduled appointments. If you arrive without an appointment, you may have longer wait times as they will assist appointments before walk-ins.

Please contact the Foster Department at (515) 473-9108 or email Foster Supervisor Amy Kopatich akopatich@arl-iowa.org or Foster Assistant Tristan Haag at thaag@arl-iowa.org. Email is the best form of communication. The foster staff are generally in the building seven days a week between 9:00am and 7:00pm. They may be away from the immediate area, so, if possible, please send an email or leave a message.

If the situation arises after these hours and you feel it is critical to talk to someone immediately, please call the emergency foster phone at 515-608-0393

After Hours Emergency:

The ARL utilizes Blue Pearl as our emergency, overnight vet clinic. If you are experiencing a medical emergency pertaining to your foster cat, please call the emergency foster phone (515-608-0393) for approval prior to transporting your foster cat to Blue Pearl. If you choose to take a foster animal to Blue Pearl or any other veterinary professional without approval from your foster coordinators, understand that you are doing so by incurring the cost yourself. The ARL will not reimburse outside routine or emergency vet visits.

Please see below for guidelines on what constitutes a medical emergency.

Medical Emergencies

The following would always constitute a medical emergency that would require immediate veterinary assistance. If you experience the following during business hours, please contact your foster coordinators. If it is after hours, please call the emergency phone.

- ***Showing signs of Panleuk***

Of the symptoms listed in the “Common Illnesses” portion of this manual, if your foster kitten or kittens are experiencing one or more symptoms severely, contact your foster department immediately. If you suspect your foster kitten has panleuk, quarantine them away from any other cats living in your home immediately. Please DO NOT arrive at the ARL without communicating with your foster coordinators prior to your arrival as you may be putting the other cats in our care at risk by doing so. This is a highly contagious disease and we will treat it as such.

- ***Body temp above 103 or under 100 degrees Fahrenheit***

To take the temperature of your foster kitten or cat, you will need a regular human thermometer and KY Jelly or petroleum jelly. Wipe the KY Jelly or petroleum jelly on the thermometer and insert the end into the cat's rectum. Hold it there for at least a minute before reading. If the animal's temperature is too low, begin by placing a heating pad or warm water bottle near them. If the animal's temperature is too high, remove supplemental heat. If no heat is being supplemented, move them to a cooler area in your house or place cool, damp towels near them until they can be seen by a veterinary professional.

- ***Severe Trauma***

This may include being hit by a car, dropped, stepped on, etc. If your foster cat is showing signs of pain and distress, massive bleeding, or broken bones, it is important to contact your emergency number for assistance immediately. If your foster cat is bleeding profusely, attempt to slow or stop the bleeding with a pressure bandage if the cat will allow it. If broken bones are suspected, contact the emergency number before moving the animal. Remember that a cat in pain will sometimes react aggressively in certain situations. Please use caution when handling a cat with any sort of suspected injury.

- ***Unconscious or Unresponsive***

If your foster cat is unresponsive to outside stimuli (you are unable to “wake” them) or appear to be unconscious, please contact your foster coordinators or emergency number immediately.

- ***Labored Breathing***

If your foster cat appears to be struggling to breathe, is taking shallow, labored breaths, or breathing irregularly, this may be indicative of a medical emergency. Please contact your foster coordinators for further guidance.

- ***Ingestion of Known or Suspected Toxin or Poison***

In the situation that you suspect or can confirm your foster cat has ingested something that may be poisonous or toxic, contact your foster coordinators immediately. Be sure to have the name of the toxin you suspect available so you are able to inform your foster coordinators and the vet. A picture of the label may be helpful in this situation.

- ***Choking or Aspiration***

If you suspect your foster cat to be choking on something it is important to contact the emergency number immediately. If their airway is completely blocked, there is a very short period of time to attempt any life saving measures. It may be worth attempting to clear the obstruction. See [What to Do if Your Cat is Choking | Hill's Pet \(hillspet.com\)](#) for further information.

What if my foster animal bites or scratches someone or another animal?

Foster Caregivers are required to report any unusual aggressive behavior or any bite or serious scratch that breaks the skin. Iowa law mandates that any dog or cat that bites must be placed on a 10-day quarantine for rabies observation.

If a bite occurs:

- Clean and flush the wound immediately with soap and water
- Consult your physician for further instructions
- Report the incident to the foster team as soon as possible. They will complete a “Bite Form and Incident Report”
- The animal will be scheduled to be seen by the ARL medical team and will remain at the shelter for the duration of the 10-day quarantine period as directed by Iowa law
- This incident will not be seen as a “mark against this animal”. Following the mandatory quarantine, this animal will be assessed by our behavior team to determine a individual plan for the animal in order to set them up for success in the future and to prevent similar incidents.
- This incident will not be seen as a “mark against the foster”. Your foster coordinators would like to speak with you about the incident in order to use it as a learning and teaching resource. The ARL understands accidents happen and would like to work with foster caregivers to prevent similar incidents from happening in the future.

If a bite is not reported:

- It creates a hazard for others handling that animal. An animal that has bitten once is usually less inhibited in biting a second time.
- If the animal is rabid, it could mean the death of the bitten individual.

Commonly Asked Questions

- *What if my foster cat gets out or goes missing?*

In the event that your foster pet goes missing at any time, please inform the foster department. They will be able to assist in the search and let other agencies know that we are missing that animal, should it turn up at another shelter or rescue. The ARL understands animals get lost. Along with that, we do not blame the caregiver for any incident like this. This is a large reason why all age-appropriate cats and kittens will be microchipped prior to going to foster.

- *What if my foster animal gets sick?*

Please see the section on Common Diseases and Medical Emergencies. Contact your foster department with any further questions or concerns.

- *Are foster animals ever euthanized?*

Much energy, love, time and veterinary care are devoted to animals in foster care, and the shelter is committed to finding homes for ALL of these animals. Foster caregivers can feel confident that the shelter will not euthanize any animal unless it becomes seriously ill or injured and is suffering. If no viable medical treatment is available or the animal poses a threat either through contagion or behavior, the animal may be euthanized. All attempts will be made to provide foster caregivers with honesty and compassion in these situations.

Communicate any concerns regarding your foster animal with your foster coordinators. We cannot help if we do not know what is happening.

- ***What happens after I agree to foster a cat(s)?***

After replying to a foster shoutout and committing to foster an animal, you will schedule a time to pick up that foster animal. For neonates that need overnight care, the scheduled pick-up time will need to be the same day prior to when the ARL closes that day. For nursing mothers, weaned kittens, and adult cats the foster department may consider scheduling a pick-up time for the next day. Care instructions, special equipment, special food, and medications will be supplied at the time of pick up.

- ***What if I cannot continue to care for my foster animal?***

Do not worry – if you must return the foster animal, we will continue the care of the animal either in the shelter or in another approved foster home. Caregivers who cannot fulfill the entire foster commitment are asked to contact the Foster Department as soon as possible so that other arrangements can be made. Foster animals must remain in the immediate care of the appointed foster caregiver. Leaving a foster animal in anyone else's care, unless specific arrangements have been approved by your foster coordinators, is prohibited.

- ***Can I say no to fostering a specific cat or type of cat?***

Please say no if you do not feel it is a good time for you to care for a foster animal. The program is designed to provide the best experience for both the animal and the caregiver. Often after a difficult experience with high risk foster animal, you may need a break. Please do not feel obligated to agree to a specific foster. We ask and encourage you to be honest with us and know your own limits. There will always be another opportunity to foster.

- ***What are the time commitments?***

Each animal is different; therefore, each foster circumstance will reflect this. Time commitment and responsibilities depend upon the situation and animal. It will be the responsibility of your foster coordinators to give you a time estimate on each fostering time commitment, to the best of their ability. As a general guideline, this is what you can expect:

- Kittens under 8 weeks: return at 8 weeks of age
- Shelter Cat Getaway: in foster for a minimum of 1 week unless adopted prior to the end of the first week
- Nursing mothers with litter: return when kittens are 8 weeks of age
- Surgery recovery cats and kittens: dependent on surgery and extent of repair performed
- Fearful, shy, or under-socialized kittens: dependent on behavioral progress
- Crisis care cats: return date dependent on owner's situation

* Please communicate with your foster coordinator if you believe there is any reason your foster animal will not be cleared for their next step toward an adoptive home (illness, behavior concerns, etc.) *

- ***How do I know when to return my foster animal?***

At the time you pick up your foster animal a tentative date should be determined. This is an estimate because all animals are different. You will need to communicate with your foster coordinators in order to schedule an appointment to return your foster animal. Please do not show up without scheduling an appointment with your foster coordinators prior. Our staff need a chance to prepare for your arrival. If you arrive without an appointment, you may have longer wait times as they will assist appointments before walk-ins.

- ***How do I know when to bring my foster animal in for a checkup?***

Your foster coordinators will be the point of contact for scheduling all checkups for your foster animal. If you feel as though an upcoming vaccination appointment or medication appointment has yet to be scheduled, please contact the foster department promptly.

- ***Can my foster animal(s) come with me on vacation?***

No foster pet will be approved to go on vacation with their foster caregiver at any time for any duration of time. The ARL requires its fostered animals to remain within a 45-minute radius of the Main location. This is in case of any emergency situation that may arise. Under no circumstance should an ARL animal cross state lines without explicit approval and proper documentation from the transport department.

- ***Who do I contact if I have behavior concerns or questions regarding my foster animal?***

Contact your foster coordinators with any questions or concerns in regards to your foster animal's behavior. They will communicate with the appropriate teams in order to provide you with any necessary and applicable information for your foster animal.

If you feel that your foster animal's behavior is aggressive or dangerous in any way, contact the foster department immediately for further instruction.

- ***What is a VIP and who can place a VIP on my foster animal?***

To the ARL, a VIP is someone interested in adopting an animal once that animal is deemed available for adoption in accordance with our protocols and standards.

Anyone may place a VIP on adult cats and kittens, including foster families, friends of the foster, and members of the public who have seen or met these felines.

The VIP will be contacted if and when the animal becomes available for adoption. The foster caregiver should contact the foster department to place a VIP for any animal in foster. The foster caregiver should be prepared with the interested adopter's name, phone number, email address, and address.