

Caring for Your Pregnant Dog

Pregnancy

It is important to record the date of mating so that the due date for whelping can be calculated. On average the length of a dog's pregnancy is 63 days. If your dog starts to whelp on or before day 58, the pups will be too weak to survive. If it has been more than 66 days, contact your vet as something may be wrong.

Signs of pregnancy include:

- A 40% increase in weight during the last half of the pregnancy
- Teats will become enlarged at 28 days
- Mammary glands may start to develop at 35 days and milk may be produced 1-2 weeks before whelping
- There may be a mucous discharge from the vulva after 32 days

It is possible to confirm a pregnancy by palpating the pups between 20-30 days of pregnancy, unless the bitch is overweight, nervous or heavily muscled. At 50 days the pups are again palpable, by which time the pregnancy may be obvious.

Ultrasounding your bitch to confirm pregnancy is possible from about day 28. After 45 days, pregnancy can be confirmed using x-rays (this will give you the most accurate result regarding the number of pups present, however it is not always possible to exactly detect all pups present).

Diet

A pregnant or lactating bitch needs a nutritionally balanced and complete diet. At 5 weeks of pregnancy your bitch's feed intake should increase by 10% a week and she should be given two meals a day.

After whelping, she should be given as much as she wants to eat. It is sometimes recommended that a lactating bitch may be fed a puppy or growth diet as they tend to be higher in energy and calcium.

Worming

The bitch should be wormed regularly throughout the pregnancy and lactation as roundworms are passed from the mother to the pups through the placenta, through the milk and through the mother's faeces.

Whelping

The most reliable sign of impending whelping within 24 hrs is a drop in core body temperature by 1°C. Milk may not be produced until labour has begun.

Labour can be divided into 3 stages:

Stage 1: Begins with the onset of uterine contractions. The bitch will make a nest, is restless, pants, shiver, may not eat and may vomit. Her vulva is swollen, softened and has a clear mucous discharge. All of the signs mentioned above become more vigorous and continuous throughout the first stage. This stage on average lasts between 6-12 hrs, however as long as 24 hrs can be normal, without any obvious contraction efforts.

Stage 2: Begins with full dilation of the cervix, entry of the first pup in to the cervical canal. The bitch will have obvious abdominal contractions in attempt to deliver the first pup. This can take between 1.5-4 hrs. The 'water bag' will appear first before the pup. It will then burst and a pup should appear soon afterwards. 40% of pups are born coming backlegs first. It is important to note the time of which stage 2 starts. During this stage fluids will be lost intermittently and the bitch will repeatedly return to clean herself.

Stage 3: The bitch rests between pups (she may rest anywhere from 10 minutes to 3hrs). The after birth is usually passed after each pup and eaten by the bitch. The mother usually tears the membranes and bites the umbilical cord. She should then vigorously lick the pup to dry it, warm it and stimulate it to breath. After whelping the bitch will settle down, her breathing will become slower and deeper and she will not strain. She should be kept quiet and offered water for her to drink. No solid food should be given until at least whelping has ceased. It is advisable on the day after whelping to have the bitch and the pups checked by your vet.

When to call the vet

If whelping is proceeding normally, the bitch should be left alone until all pups have been delivered and have suckled.

Call the vet if:

- It has been more than 2 hours since the onset of straining and no pups have been produced
- There is a greenish-black discharge preceding the birth of the pups
- It has been more than 2 hours between pups, and the bitch is still straining
- The 'water bag' bursts and is not followed by a pup within 1-2 hours
- The pup is hanging out and the bitch can't deliver it within 15 minutes
- A pup has not suckled within 3 hours of birth

Aftercare

Close observation of the bitch and the pups is important during the first weeks to make sure all are well and the pups have enough milk. Puppies should be handled as little as possible during the first 2 weeks of life. The puppies should gain 10% of their body weight each day.

Eclampsia (Milkfever)

This is a condition that affects some bitches, especially small dogs with large litters. It often occurs about 3 weeks into lactation, when the mother's milk production is greatest. The bitch becomes low in calcium. Symptoms include restlessness, panting that often becomes frantic, pacing, twitching and trembling.

This is an EMERGENCY situation. If you suspect your bitch is developing these symptoms, ring the vet ASAP. The condition is easily fixed with an injection of calcium in the vein, but can lead to death if not treated promptly.

To avoid this situation, ensure your bitch had a balanced diet. You can supplement her with calcium after whelping by feeding her milk or using calcium supplements in the food.

Mastitis (Infection of the mammary gland)

Monitor the lactating bitch's teats for signs of inflammation and infection. If they appear painful, red, hard, swollen or have an unusual discharge, contact your vet for a consultation.

Weaning and feeding puppies

For large breed dogs the transition to solid food can begin at about 3 weeks and for toy breeds about 4 weeks. A gruel (quality tinned puppy food diluted 2 parts to 1 part water) can be offered in a wide, shallow, rimmed bowl. You can slowly decrease the water dilution until the puppies are fully weaned at 6-8 weeks of age.

Fresh water should always be on offer

Once they are weaned they should be fed 3 times a day (with 15-20 minutes of time for food to be available) at regular intervals. They can be fed in this manner until 4-6 months of age, or up to 9 months for giant breed dog, then they can go on twice daily feeding.

Puppy health and care

The pups ideally should be wormed every two weeks from two weeks of age until 12 weeks of age, then monthly until 6 months of age.

The puppies should be vet checked and vaccinated between 6-8 weeks of age. At this time the puppies can be microchipped (sooner if needed).

