

THE WHELPING BITCH

The Pregnancy

Gestation Period: 63 days – if you don't record the mating date, we CAN NOT tell you the due date. 3 days overdue is considered serious, and time for some form of remedial action, although there is no safe form of induction.

Pregnancy diagnosis: pregnancy may be diagnosed in the fourth week of pregnancy by hand (palpation of the abdomen) in a relaxed and not too fat bitch. Ultrasound detection is possible from about 3 weeks and after – if requested, please book to ensure the machine is on hand.

Diet:

- **Energy:** The overall level of nutrition should steadily increase over the gestation period, taking into account the development of the puppies. Requirements skyrocket after whelping as lactation places huge demands on the bitch. Dry dog food is not going to be sufficient for maintenance in late pregnancy or into lactation.
- **Laxative action:** Food in late pregnancy and into lactation should “encourage” soft faeces. Dry feeds, bones etc may lead to serious constipation. This is very important in hot weather when dehydration adds to the effect!
- **Calcium:** Is necessary for muscle contraction and also the production of milk and bone. Low calcium can cause
 1. uterine inertia at whelping – no contractions, or
 2. milk fever (eclampsia) – fitting and death if not treated. Treatment includes immediate weaning of pups – meaning you have to feed them.

Calcium is found in all proprietary dog foods. Meat is grossly deficient. Milk is NOT in any way satisfactory as a supplement for meat. You would need at least 100 litres of milk per kg of meat.

Vaccination : Should the bitch be vaccinated **greater than 2 weeks before** birth, she will pass on protection to the puppies in her first milk (colostrum). If vaccinated during the pregnancy killed virus vaccine should be used. Bitches with an up to date vaccination history do not require extra shots.

Worms : The puppy roundworm *Toxocara canis* may be passed to the puppies via the placenta ie before birth. This means if the bitch is not treated, the puppies will in fact be born with worms. Treat the bitch about two weeks before whelping.

Shelter : The bitch will want a secure quiet comfortable area in which to whelp. The most fantastic whelping box will not be accepted if people keep looking at her and making a fuss. Under the house or under the bed are favourite locations.

The Whelping

Note that whelping is not a spectator sport – don't interfere – keep away

Early signs

- Nest making – the bitch will seek out a quiet secure place about 24 hours before whelping. If you have a place ready, you may save a lot of bother. Undue stress eg from too much attention may drive her to choose somewhere undesirable. Nest making may involve much ripping up of bedding – ensure plenty of old disposable bedding is available.
- Temperature – if you have a rectal thermometer, daily rectal temperatures will reveal a drop of about 1° C approximately 24 hours prior to whelping.
- Discomfort – for several days prior to whelping the bitch will periodically show signs of discomfort.

The whelping begins

- Strong coordinated contractions begin
- 1 to 2 hours for the first pup to appear is normal
- up to 2 hours for the second pup to appear
- hopefully about 30 minutes between pups from then on
- don't panic – half of all puppies are born backwards ie breech

Umbilical cords – what length – leave it to the bitch – if you attempt to cut them with sharp scissors or a knife they will likely bleed. If they have not been attended to by the bitch within several hours they may be trimmed to about 1.5cm in length – the residual will shrivel away.

Problems

Stuck pup – if a pup is stuck far enough out to see, the bitch is usually able to pull it out herself. If not, it may be gently pulled out. Then leave the bitch alone again.

No pups coming – quite a list of possibilities

1. confusion that nest making is actually the whelping
2. interference by observers causing suspension of the birth
3. impatience / panic – we get many calls in the period between the first and second pup
4. pup stuck – may require a visit to the vet
5. no contractions – will require a visit to the vet – caused by calcium lack of or exhaustion
6. no pups – either all born and hidden or a phantom pregnancy. **WARNING** some bitches, especially Staffordshire Bull Terriers will EAT their pups as soon as they are born.

Milk fever / Eclampsia – shivering and shaking ⇒ paralysis with a high fever – a **life threatening** emergency requiring urgent attention. Caused by insufficient dietary calcium. In the event of eclampsia immediate weaning of the pups is necessary.

Vaginal discharge – a blood stained discharge is common for some time after whelping – for weeks in some bitches. This becomes important if it is profuse, foul smelling or irritating to the bitch

WHELPING PROGRAM

1. Bitch in season, ovulation occurs about day 9, bitch may conceive after this date – **WARNING** – if you don't record this date, you will not know when to expect pups
2. Diet – balanced calcium
3. Pregnancy diagnosis if needed – manual only possible between 4 and 5 weeks, ultra sound from 3 weeks onwards
4. If the bitch is not vaccinated, vaccinate with killed virus vaccines at least 2 weeks prior to whelping
5. Worm the bitch 2 weeks prior to whelping
6. Build up calcium over last week – balanced calcium before this, boosted calcium after
7. Prepare your choice of whelping place – and hope she likes it
8. Keep out of the way during whelping
9. If you are worried, bring in the pups and the bitch about 2 days after the whelping to ensure no retained pups are present, plus check for deformities etc

PUPPY CARE

1. Warmth – if you have a heated whelping box or other warmed area, the energy requirement for the pups will be a fraction of normal. This reflects in better weight gains and a much easier time for the bitch
2. Worms – worm puppies at 2,4,6,8,10 and 12 weeks of age with a roundworming preparation. Tapeworms should not be a problem until after 12 weeks of age. Note that preparations containing *Piperazine citrate* are not effective
3. Feeding – puppies are capable of supplementing their milk with solids from an early age. From three weeks of age provide them with supplementary feed twice daily. Start off with a slurry of Farex baby cereal, milk and mashed up canned puppy food. Start off with a very wet slurry (to prevent dehydration) and steadily increase the dry content over the weeks.