Birthing Puppies

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Revised: October 08, 2023
Published: January 01, 2001

Prenatal Care

Preparing for your dog's labor and puppy care can be both exciting and fun; still, awareness of potential problems is of paramount importance. It is a good idea to keep track of your dog's breeding date so as to know when to expect what. We will first present some prenatal care suggestions, but for more details, read specifically about care during pregnancy; you may wish to begin there.

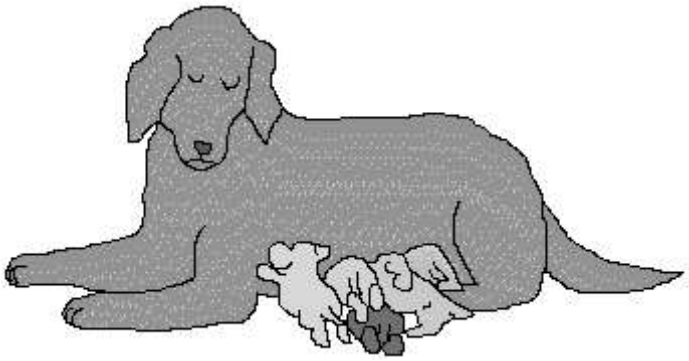


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After about 35 days of pregnancy, the mother's nutritional needs will begin to increase. In general, she should require about twice as much food as usual, whereas when she begins nursing, she will need three times as much food. The best nutritional plan is to buy a dog food approved for growth (i.e., puppy food) and feed according to the package; such diets are balanced and require no supplementation, plus they typically have the extra calories needed by the pregnant or nursing mother. Exercise of the pregnant mother need not be restricted until after the first 4-6 weeks of pregnancy. Do not supplement calcium as this can cause metabolic imbalances; also, excess vitamins may be harmful to the puppies.

Sometime around the 45th day, your dog should be examined by a veterinarian. At this time, the skeletons of the unborn pups will have mineralized and are thus going to be visible on an x-ray. Your dog's abdomen should be x-rayed so that you know how many pups to expect. This is important as you will need to know when her labor is finished so you can be sure none of the puppies have been retained. Ultrasound may be used to confirm pregnancy much earlier (after 25 days, the embryonic heart may be seen beating), but it is more difficult to count the number of pups using this method. A general pregnancy blood test can be performed around day 35 just to confirm whether or not she is pregnant, but neither this nor ultrasound will tell you how many puppies to expect; only radiographs can do that.

A comfortable area should be set aside for whelping (giving birth) and raising the puppies. The mother should feel at home here and should be able to come and go as she likes while the puppies must remain confined.

It is important that the mother be isolated from all other dogs for three weeks prior to labor through three weeks after delivery to prevent herpes infection. Herpes is spread by sniffing and licking between two dogs. Adult dogs rarely have any symptoms but the newborn or unborn puppies generally die.

The dog's gestation period is considered to be 63 days, though this is not written in stone, and a normal range might be 58 to 68 days.

Impending Labor

When your dog's due date is approaching, you should begin monitoring her rectal temperature. When her temperature drops below 100°F (normal canine temperature is 101-102°F), labor may be expected within 24 hours.

It is a good practice to know how to take your pregnant dog’s temperature as her due date approaches. Ask your veterinarian to show you how.

The First Stage of Labor

During this stage, uterine contractions begin. The mother will appear restless and may pace, dig, shiver, pant, or even vomit. This is all normal and all an owner can do is see that she has water available should she want it. This stage of labor is long, lasting 6 to 12 hours and culminates with full dilation of the cervix in preparation to expel a puppy.

The Second and Third Stages of Labor

Puppies are born covered in membranes that must be cleaned away or the pup will suffocate. The mother will bite and lick the membranes away. Allow her a minute or two after birth to do this; if she does not do it, then you must clean the pup for her. Simply remove the slippery covering and rub the puppy with a clean towel. The umbilical cord may be tied in a knot about one inch from the pup and cut with scissors on the far side of the knot. Be careful not to pull on the umbilical cord as this can injure the puppy. The mother may want to eat the placenta but this is probably not a good idea as vomiting it up later is common; it is best to clean away the placenta yourself.

Expect one pup every 45 to 60 minutes with 10-30 minutes of hard straining. It is normal for the mother to take a rest partway through delivery and she may not strain at all for up to four hours between pups. If she is seen straining hard for over 30 minutes or if she takes longer than a 4-hour break, consult a veterinarian. This is where it is important to know whether she has delivered the entire litter that was counted on the X-ray. Expect some puppies (probably half of them) to be born tail first, which is normal for dogs.

Most of the time nature handles things according to plan and there are no complications. The important thing is to be prepared and know what constitutes a deviation from normal. During the delivery, a puppy can get stuck either because of size or positioning, the mom can get too tired or dehydrated to complete the mission without help, or any number of unexpected problems can arise. Problems can happen during the actual delivery or in the days following.

Call your veterinarian if:

- 30 to 60 minutes of strong contractions occur with no puppy being produced.
- More than 4 hours pass between pups and you know there are more inside.
- She fails to go into labor within 24 hours of her temperature drop.
- She is obviously in extreme pain.
- Greater than 70 days of gestation have passed.

It is normal for the mother to spike a fever in the 24 to 48 hours following birth. Clinical signs of illness should not accompany this fever.

Normal vaginal discharge after giving birth should be odorless and may be green, dark red-brown or bloody and may persist in small amounts for up to 8 weeks.

Green discharge is a bit special as this is the discharge indicating separation of a placenta from the uterus. During the birth of a litter, many placentas are separating so there will be plenty of green discharge. Where this becomes important is on the very first puppy, as when the first placenta separates, its associated puppy will need oxygen very soon, so a live puppy should appear within 30 minutes of seeing green discharge. If not, there is a problem, and you should consult a veterinarian.

Problems to Watch for in the Following Days

Metritis (Inflammation of the Uterus)

Signs of this condition are as follows:

- fever
- foul-smelling vaginal discharge
- listlessness
- loss of appetite
- no interest in the puppies
- decreased milk production

If these signs are noted, usually in the first day or two postpartum, a veterinarian should be consulted. Your dog may have retained a placenta or have suffered some trauma during delivery. Animals who require assistance with delivery are often predisposed to metritis. She will likely need to be spayed.

Eclampsia

This condition results when the mother has trouble supporting the calcium demand of lactation and is a particular concern for toy breed dogs. Calcium supplementation predisposes a new mother to this condition. Usually affected animals are small dogs. They demonstrate:

- nervousness and restlessness
- no interest in the pups
- stiff, painful gait

This progresses to:

- muscle spasms
- inability to stand
- fever
- seizures

This condition generally occurs in the first three weeks of lactation and a veterinarian should be consulted immediately.

Mastitis (Inflammation of the Breasts)

Normal nursing glands are soft and enlarged. Diseased glands are red, hard, and painful. In general, the mother does not act sick; the disease is confined to the mammary tissue. The mother may be sore and discourage the pups from nursing; however, it is important to keep the pups nursing the affected glands. This is not harmful to the puppies and helps flush out the infected material.

Warm compresses may be helpful.

Agalactia (Not Producing Milk)

Milk production and secretion (let down) is essential for the puppies' nutrition. If the puppies are nursing but it appears that milk is simply not flowing, there are a few simple things to try at home before going to the veterinarian. First, make sure the puppy room is not too warm and that the mother has plenty of food and water and that she seems to be healthy in other respects. If these issues seem controlled, the next step is to determine if milk is being produced and not "let down" or simply not being produced as different hormones are involved in each process. Your veterinarian will need to intercede with treatment for the mother. If the pups cannot so much as get colostrum, that all-important first milk that provides immunity from common infections, they may need to receive injections of canine plasma to replace the antibodies they did not get from their mother.

Most dogs are excellent mothers and problems are few. The basic rule is to seek veterinary care if she seems to feel sick or if she ceases to care for her young. Puppies nurse until they are about six weeks old but can begin solid foods as early as four weeks of age. A good age for adoption to a new home is eight weeks or later.

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