



Pregnancy & Whelping in Dogs

Congratulations! These notes are a short guide to what to expect when your bitch is pregnant. If your experience is different to things you have read, you should call your vet. This is a time to remember to be safe rather than sorry!

The average length of pregnancy in dogs is 63-64 days (+/- 7 days)

Confirming pregnancy

It is a lot easier to plan for the whelping when you are sure your bitch is pregnant. Pregnancy can be confirmed in several different ways.

- Palpating the abdomen by a veterinarian is possible from 24 days after mating but is not 100% reliable or accurate.
- An ultrasound can confirm pregnancy from 3-4 weeks after mating but does not count pups.
- An X-ray can confirm pregnancy in the last 2-3 weeks of pregnancy and count most puppies.
- A blood test can be used to confirm pregnancy (looking for a pregnancy hormone called relaxin). This is taken 28 days after mating and is repeated 7 days later only if it is negative. In practice a blood test is rarely used

Care of pregnant bitch

Pregnant bitches do require some special care and attention.

- Feed *puppy* food throughout pregnancy and while she is nursing the puppies (this provides extra nutrients and calcium for the puppies to develop, and for her to produce milk to feed the pups)
 - Feed her enough to keep her in ideal body condition. Whelping can be very hard, or impossible without help if the bitch is overweight. Feeding and caring for a litter of puppies takes a lot of energy, so you don't want her too thin either. Feed more frequently in late pregnancy.
- Ensure she has been fully vaccinated *before* she is mated, as most vaccines are unsafe during pregnancy (check with your veterinarian)
- Give her a broad spectrum intestinal all-wormer such as Drontal or Milpro at mating, and 1 week before birth

Maintain her usual exercise, gradually reducing length of walks as the pregnancy progresses

Whelping box

It is important to have somewhere prepared for the bitch to have the pups, and for the pups to be cared for. Often a large box or crate is selected.

- Have the area ready 1-2 weeks before the bitch is due to have pups.
- It should be in a warm and quiet place (not near the washing machine!), and away from a lot of human activity.
- The box keeps pups confined (can't escape) but the bitch dog can get out easily.
- Have a bench in the box that the pups can get under (so they are not rolled on by the bitch)
- The room temperature should be kept at around 27-28 degrees. (Orphan pups need much warmer temperatures for the first 3-4 weeks).
- Warm towels in box during labour and after pups born. Newspaper is suitable to line the base.

Signs of impending labour

- A drop in rectal temperature by about 1°C indicates whelping is likely to begin within 24 hours. It is a good idea to check the bitches' temperature every 8-12 hours (2-3 times a day) and keep a graph. The normal dogs' temperature is about 38-39.0
- A blood test by a veterinarian to find a drop in progesterone. This is not commonly performed.
- The bitch will often show nesting behaviour 12-24 hours before labour commences (she may build a "nest" in which to have pups) She may be more restless, off her food and hideaway
- Mammary development and milk production - her mammary glands (teats) will swell 1-2 weeks before she gives birth, and milk is produced 24 hours before birth (note: mammary swelling and milk production may also be seen in a pseudo pregnancy or "false" pregnancy, as will nesting behaviour)
- Production of some mucous from the vulva/vagina 1-2 weeks before birth, this should *not* be dark green in colour or of a large amount.

SIGNS OF LABOUR

STAGE 1

(This stage often goes un-noticed and takes place in the 24 hours following temperature drop)

- Stage 1 of labour usually lasts 6 to 12 hours but can be up to 36hrs.

You may find your bitch is restless, and not able to get comfortable. She may stretch out on her side.

You may find her eyes different, they can dilate, and she can stare at you.

She may not want you out of her sight, she may hide, or she may go to her whelping box, or another site she has chosen.

She may vomit.

She may try to have a bowel movement from the pressure.

She may urinate frequently.

She may refuse to eat

She may have some mucus discharge, and her vulva area will become puffier.

She may start panting

STAGE 2

- Stage 2 is the actual labour, usually lasting 6 to 12 hours. It can last up to 24 hours. It is characterized by abdominal straining (contractions).

She may start shivering, trembling, and panting, examining her rear, and licking her vulva.

She may have vomiting, pass feces and urinate more.

She will have noticeable abdominal contractions

The frequency of contractions increases when a pup is in the birth canal; the "water breaks", and the pup is born in a membranous coating.

The mother licks off these membranes, which stimulates the pup to breath. The mother will usually eat the afterbirth.

Try to keep a time log of length of time between contractions starting till pup being delivered and arrival time of each pup.

Pups are usually delivered at 15-60-minute intervals, until all are out, but this is VERY variable. On average 60% of pups born headfirst, 40% born back legs first (breech). Either way is *normal*.

PLEASE NOTE!

You do not have to help her at this stage unless she is ignoring the pups completely and they are not out of their membranes or breathing. If the mother dog is not attending to and licking the pups, then you may need to rub the pups with a warm dry towel to stimulate their heartbeat and breathing.

She may be anxious and seem in pain as the first pup arrives, try to be quiet and reassuring.

If she is attending to her pups, don't interrupt! Handle them as little as possible

This stage can be interrupted if the mother is disturbed too much, so try to let her be, and check her every 30-60 minutes. Be quiet and keep spectators to a minimum.

Warning Signs: Please contact the clinic if you see:

- Green discharge before the arrival of pups. (Green discharge is only normal *AFTER* a pup is born)
- Bleeding.
- If you can see a pup in the vulva for over 5 minutes.
- Hard straining with no pup produced for over 15 minutes
- Long periods between pups with no contractions - time between pups can be very variable but if you know she still has pups to come out then contact your vet for advice if more than 2-3 hours has elapsed or she looks unhappy or has already had a dead pup.
- **Muscle Twitching - low blood calcium levels** can cause abnormal muscle and nervous movements.
- Dead puppies.
- No Pups produced within 2 hours of first contraction.

STAGE 3

- Stage 3 begins after the pup is delivered, and ends when the placenta (afterbirth) is passed.

Afterbirth is passed 5-15 minutes after each pup. In litters larger than 1, usually 1-2 pups will be born, then she will pass 1-2 afterbirths. You may not always see every placenta.

Your new mother will usually eat the afterbirth (this is safe and normal) but it is not necessary for her to do so.

Care of breeding bitch while she is nursing puppies

We advise a *post whelping check* of mum and pups at 24 hours after whelping.

- Continue feeding puppy food to the mother bitch throughout the time she is nursing the pups. It will be necessary to feed her 3-4 times daily, so she gets sufficient energy
- Ensure multiple water sources are provided.
- Give a broad spectrum intestinal all-wormer every 2 weeks after birth to the bitch at the same time as worming all the pups.

Care of pups

- Pups are kept in a warm environment (27-28 degrees).
- Clean out the whelping box area daily.
- Allow access to softened high quality (e.g., Hill's Science Diet) puppy food from 25 days old.
- Once eyes and ears are opened, pups are walking around at about 2 weeks have water available.

Do not feed them milk or any human food.

- Give a broad spectrum intestinal all-wormer according to the puppies weight every 2 weeks from 2 to 8 weeks of age, then monthly until 6 months of age
- Pups should receive their first vaccination between 6-8 weeks of age

YOU WILL BE BUSY!!! IN TERMS OF TIME FOR THE FEW WEEKS THEY ARE WITH YOU, CARING FOR A LITTER OF PUPS IS LIKE HAVING RESPONSIBILITY FOR HUMAN INFANT.

GOOD LUCK AND ENJOY THE EXPERIENCE! 😊