

General Practice Service
Willows Information Sheets

Looking after your pregnant bitch





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The following information is aimed at ordinary dog owners rather than dog breeders. It is only a summary and we recommend researching the subject more thoroughly so that you are well prepared for all eventualities. 'The Book of the Bitch' by J.M. Evans and Kay White is a good place to start and we are more than happy to discuss any aspect of your dog's pregnancy with you in more detail.

Should your bitch have puppies?

Although puppies are extremely appealing, there are some important issues to consider before allowing your bitch to have puppies:

- Unfortunately, there are already thousands of unwanted dogs and puppies needing homes in rescue centres in the UK. You must be sure that you can guarantee good homes for your litter of puppies.
- It is important to consider the safety of your bitch. Very young or old dogs, dogs in poor condition or certain breeds of dog have an increased risk of complications during pregnancy and labour and may have difficulty rearing their puppies.
- It is essential to consider the commitment required in terms of both time and finances. For example it is not uncommon for an emergency caesarian section to be required, sometimes in the middle of the night. It may even become necessary to hand rear the puppies which involves feeding them every couple of hours, whatever your other commitments may be.
- If you are considering breeding from a pedigree bitch then it is important to investigate whether there are any inherited conditions that may affect the breed. There are several health schemes currently in operation to assist in the prevention or control of certain diseases – links to the British Veterinary Association and Kennel Club websites at the end of this information sheet.

We recommend the routine spaying of bitches after their first season if they are not intended for breeding. If your bitch is mated unintentionally then it is possible to give her injections to prevent the pregnancy – you should contact us straight away, as the injections have to be given at exactly the right time.

Feeding

Good balanced nutrition is vital, both during pregnancy while the puppies are developing in the womb and during lactation, when your bitch will be producing milk for multiple hungry puppies. A standard adult dog food won't provide all the extra nutrients required, and in fact it is best to change your bitch's diet to a commercially produced puppy food. The puppy food should be introduced from about the fourth week of pregnancy, as the developing foetuses start to place extra demands on the mother-to-be. To avoid any tummy upsets, the change of diet should be done gradually over a period of 5 days. Try to use the brand of dog food that your dog is used to and feed a wet or dry diet according to what she usually prefers.

The amount that you feed your bitch should be based on the manufacturer's guidelines found on the food packaging and can be adjusted according to her body condition. Feed several small meals throughout the day and ensure that there is always plenty of fresh water available.

The puppy food should continue to be fed to your bitch throughout lactation and gradually reduced as the puppies start to wean at around 4 weeks of age.

If a good quality commercial puppy food is fed during pregnancy and lactation, there is no need to give supplements of extra vitamins or minerals. In fact, giving additional calcium during pregnancy can lead to problems with low blood calcium during lactation.

Exercise

Exercise of the pregnant bitch does not need to be restricted until after the first 4 to 6 weeks of pregnancy.

Vaccination

Mothers provide protective immunity to their puppies via their colostrum (the milk produced in the first few hours after birth). To ensure that your bitch has sufficient antibodies to pass on to her puppies, it is important that she is up to date with her routine vaccinations prior to mating. If by the time your bitch is pregnant, she has not been vaccinated or her vaccinations have lapsed, then careful consideration must be given to the type and timing of vaccination to be used, as only certain vaccines can be given safely during pregnancy.

The puppies should be vaccinated at 10 and 12 weeks of age and then annually.

Worming

All bitches are infected with roundworm larvae. These lie hidden and dormant within the body of the bitch and become active during pregnancy, infecting the pups while they are still in the womb. In addition, once the puppies are born, further worm infection comes from the milk when they are suckling. Ideally, starting from day 40 of the pregnancy, bitches need to be wormed every day until 2 days after whelping. Please check with us which worming product to use, as some are not only ineffective against the dormant worm larvae but are also unsafe to use during pregnancy.

The puppies should be wormed at 2, 5, 8 and 12 weeks of age, and then monthly until they are 6 months old. The mother should be wormed at the same time as the puppies until they are weaned.

Flea Control

Please check with us which flea products are safe to use during pregnancy and safe to apply to puppies.

Labour / Whelping

Pregnancy lasts on average for 63 days but can vary from 56 to 72 days. Litter sizes can range from 1 puppy in miniature breeds to over 15 in giant breeds!

Several days before whelping, the bitch's behaviour may alter. She may become restless, seek seclusion or become more attentive and may refuse food.

During first stage labour, uterine contractions begin. The restless behaviour increases and she may pace, dig, tear up and rearrange bedding, shiver, pant or even vomit. This preparatory stage normally lasts between 6 and 12 hours before the bitch progresses to the second stage of labour.

In the second stage, the uterine contractions increase in intensity and abdominal straining begins, foetal fluids are passed and a puppy is expelled. The third stage refers to the expulsion of the placenta and afterbirth. Each pup may not be followed by afterbirth; the mother may pass two pups and then two placentas. Expect some puppies (probably half of them) to be born tail first.

Expect one pup on average every 45 to 60 minutes (varies from 5 to 120 minutes) with 10 to 30 minutes of hard straining. It is normal for bitches to take a rest part way through delivery, and she may not strain at all for up to 4 hours between pups.

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.

Whelping is usually completed within 6 hours after the onset of second stage labour, but may last up to 12 hours.

Reasons to call the vet:

- There is a greenish vulval discharge indicating placental separation but no puppy is born within 2 to 4 hours
- Foetal fluid was passed more than 2 to 3 hours ago, but nothing has happened since
- 20 to 30 minutes of strong, regular straining occurs with no puppy being produced
- Greater than 2 to 4 hours pass between pups and you know there are more inside
- There is weak, irregular straining for more than 2 to 4 hours
- Your bitch has been in second stage labour for more than 12 hours
- If a puppy appears to be stuck in the birth canal and is partially visible
- Your bitch is in obvious extreme pain
- If you have any concerns – it is better to [contact us](#) for advice sooner rather than later

Post-whelping complications

Complications can sometimes occur after whelping. These include problems such as the retention of foetal membranes, metritis (inflammation / infection of the womb) and mastitis (inflammation / infection of the mammary glands). If your dog is unwilling to settle with her puppies or ignores them, is dull and lethargic, refuses food, seems to have abdominal pain, stops drinking or drinks more, or has an abnormally persistent or smelly vaginal discharge (normal discharge is odourless and may be green, dark red-brown or bloody and may persist in small amounts for up to 8 weeks), then she should be seen by the vet.

Lactation tetany or eclampsia is caused by low blood calcium levels due to the huge demand of milk production. Signs include nervousness and restlessness, no interest in or even aggression towards the pups, inco-ordination, muscle spasm, collapse and fitting – if you see these signs your bitch needs to be seen urgently by the vet.

Further information is available from:

The British Veterinary Association
www.bva.co.uk - follow the link to Canine Health Schemes

The Kennel Club:
www.thekennelclub.org.uk

If you have any queries or concerns regarding your pregnant or nursing bitch, please do not hesitate to [contact us](#).

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