

# Breeding Dogs: The Whelping Bitch



## What happens during parturition?

Most dogs experience delivery without complications; however, all mothers should be attended by their owners until all the puppies are born.

## Signs of impending whelping

Often, but not always the bitches temperature will drop before whelping. For this reason, we encourage owners to measure body temperature twice daily starting a week before the expected due date. The temperature usually drops one degree below the bitches normal body temp 24-36 hours before whelping, and then it may rise again

For example, a bitch with a normal temp 38.2 degrees may drop to 37.2 degrees, and a bitch with normal body temp of 37.2 degrees may drop to 36.6 degrees. The temperature drop does not have to be below 37 degrees as some texts will suggest.

Signs of impending whelping include nervousness and panting. The bitch will often stop eating during the last 24 hours before labour although with some breeds this does not apply.

Delivery times will vary. Generally a whelping bitch should pass a pup on average every half an hour. If a bitch has 6 pups, they may pass 3 quickly, then rest for an hour and then pass the next 3 quickly.

If we know the number of puppies present from the 8 week radiographs, the total whelping time can be calculated as 45mins x the number of puppies.

## The normal birth process

Puppies are usually born head first; with the head and forelegs extended. This is called anterior presentation. Posterior presentation is also normal in the bitch. The puppy is born with tail and hind-legs coming first.

Breech presentation, in which the hind-legs are forward and the tail and rump is presented, is abnormal. However, it does occur and can result in a normal birth although breech presentations frequently present problems. If a puppy's rump is presented and the bitch is straining continuously without making any progress, veterinary attention should be sought without delay.

Each puppy is enclosed in a sac that is part of the placenta ('afterbirth'). These usually pass after the

puppies are born. Sometimes two pups are passed then 2 placentas. However, any that do not pass usually disintegrate and are passed within 24-48 hours after delivery.

## During the delivery

Once active pushing begins, we recommend calcium supplement be given orally to help the uterus to contract and reduce the chances of dystocia (difficult birthing). Calcium gluconate (Sandoz syrup) is given 1ml/kg/hr. So a 20kg bitch would receive 20ml every hour of active labour until all the puppies are passed. It is not started prior to whelping .

If the delivery proceeds normally, a few contractions will discharge the puppy; it should exit the birth canal within a few minutes of being visible. Following delivery, the mother should lick the newborn's face. She will then proceed to wash it and toss it about. Her tongue is used to tear the sac and expose the mouth and nose.

This vigorous washing stimulates circulation, causing the puppy to cry and begin breathing; it also dries the newborn's hair coat. The mother will sever the umbilical cord by chewing it about 1 inch (1.9 – 2.5cm) from the body. Next, she will eat the placenta.

If the puppy or fluid-filled bubble is partially visible from the vagina, the owner should assist delivery. A piece of dampened gauze or thin face cloth can be used to break the bubble and grasp the head or feet. When a contraction occurs, firm traction should be applied in a downward (i.e. toward her rear feet) direction. If reasonable traction is applied without being able to remove the puppy, or if the mother cries intensely during this process, the puppy is wedged. Veterinary help may be needed.

It is normal for the mother to remove the placental sac and clean the puppies; however, first-time mothers may be bewildered by the experience and hesitate to do so. If the sac is not removed within a few minutes after delivery, the puppy will suffocate. So you should be prepared to intervene. The puppy's face should be



wiped with a damp face cloth or gauze to remove the sac and allow breathing. Vigorous rubbing with a warm soft towel will stimulate circulation and dry the hair. If the puppy does not start to take a breath, gentle blowing down the throat after gently opening the mouth with the fingers also helps to assist respiration. The umbilical cord should be tied using sewing thread or dental floss and cut with clean scissors. The cord should be tied snugly and cut about half an inch (1.3cm) from the body so it is unlikely to be pulled off as the puppy moves around the whelping box.

Newborn puppies may aspirate fluid into the lungs, as evidenced by a raspy noise during respiration. The fluid can be removed by the following procedure. First, the puppy should be held in the palm of your hand. The puppy's face should be cradled between the first two fingers. The head should be held firmly with this hand, and the body should be held firmly with the other. Next, a downward swing motion with the hands should make the puppy gasp. Gravity will help the fluid and mucus to flow out of the lungs. This process may be tried several times until the lungs sound clear. The tongue is a reliable indicator of successful respiration. If the puppy is getting adequate oxygen, it will appear pink to red. A bluish coloured tongue indicates insufficient oxygen to the lungs, signaling that the swinging procedure should be repeated.

It is helpful to have a smaller, clean dry box lined with a warm towel for the newborn puppies. After the puppy is stable and the cord has been tied, it should be placed in the incubator box while the mother is completing delivery. Warmth is essential so a heating pad or hot water bottle should be placed in the box, or a heat lamp may be placed nearby. If a heating pad is used, it should be placed on the low setting and covered with a towel to prevent overheating. A hot water bottle should be covered with a towel. Remember, the newborn puppies may be unable to move away from the heat source.

### **After the delivery**

Once delivery is completed, the soiled newspaper should be removed from the whelping box. The box should be lined with soft acrylic type bedding, prior to the puppies' return. The mother should accept the puppies readily and settle down to feed them.

The mother and her litter should be examined by a veterinary surgeon within 24 hours after the delivery is completed. This visit is to check the mother for complete

delivery, and to check the new-born puppies. The mother may receive an injection to contract the uterus and stimulate milk production. Sometimes antibiotics may be prescribed if it is thought there is any infection present.

The mother may have a bloody vaginal discharge for up to 6 weeks following delivery. There should be no foul odour from this discharge.

### **What happens if my dog has trouble delivering her puppies?**

Although most dogs deliver without the need for assistance, problems do arise which require the attention of a veterinarian.

#### **Professional assistance should be sought if any of the following occur:**

- Twenty minutes of intense labour contractions occur without a puppy being delivered.
- Ten minutes of intense labour occurs when a puppy or a fluid-filled bubble is visible in the birth canal.
- The mother experiences sudden depression or marked lethargy.
- There is more than 2 hours between puppies
- Fresh blood discharges from the vagina for more than 5 minutes.
- If a green discharge is seen without any puppies having been born.

Difficulty delivering (dystocia) usually results in a caesarian. The condition of the mother, size of the litter, and size of the puppies are factors used in making that decision.

### **Is it likely that one or more puppies will be stillborn?**

It is not uncommon for one or two puppies in a litter to be stillborn. Sometimes, a stillborn puppy will disrupt labour, resulting in dystocia. At other times, the dead puppy will be born normally.

Although there is always a cause for this occurrence, it is often not easily determined without a full post mortem examination of the puppy including bacteriological examination and submission of tissues to a pathologist. Your veterinary surgeon may in certain circumstances recommend this procedure and it is worthwhile discussing the cost beforehand since sometimes it can be considerable. However, it may prevent future problems.