

Breeding Dogs: The Pregnant Bitch



Breeding from your bitch and raising her puppies can be an extremely rewarding experience or it may produce frustration and failure. Pet bitches are often torn between their instinctive desire to be with their puppies and the routines they have acquired with their owners. This can lead to problems and should be borne in mind before breeding is contemplated. In addition, raising a litter of puppies is an extremely time-consuming exercise and one which should not be embarked upon without due consideration. The following information is provided in order to increase your chances of success.

How often does a bitch come into heat?

The bitch comes into heat about every 6 months, although very large breeds of dogs may cycle anything up to one in 15 months. In most giant breeds (such as Great Danes, Irish Wolfhounds and St Bernard's) a yearly heat is normal.

What are the signs of heat?

The most notable sign of heat is vaginal bleeding. This begins during the first week and lasts for about 9-14 days. Swelling of the vulva can also occur. During this period male dogs will be attracted to her.

What should I do to be sure that a mating is accomplished successfully?

Male dogs are more successful when the environment is familiar. Therefore, it is preferable to take the female to the male's home for breeding. The timing for mating is critical. The most fertile time is considered the 10th through the 14th day of the heat period. However, some dogs will be fertile as early as the 3rd day and as late as the 21st day.

Are there tests to determine when to mate my bitch?

There are two tests that are used for this purpose. The first is a *microscopic examination of vaginal cells* to detect changes in cell appearance and numbers. This method is at best, a rough guide to stages of the bitches season and is often used to determine when to start measuring blood progesterone levels.

Blood progesterone levels are very accurate and gives a very good indication of when ovulation occurs and when mating is most likely to be successful. It is used for dogs that have a history of unsuccessful matings or for timing of artificial inseminations in very valuable bitches.

What should I expect during my dog's pregnancy?

Pregnancy, also called the gestation period, normally ranges from 60 to 67 days, the average being 63 days. Most dogs deliver (whelp) between days 63 and 65. The only way to accurately determine the stage of pregnancy is to count days from the time of ovulation, not from time of mating.

With all planned matings the date should be recorded and the bitch then examined approximately 4 weeks from the date of mating to detect the signs of pregnancy. *Ultrasound scans* can be carried out at around the 28th day and radiographs from around the 38th day.

Feeding

It is important that a bitch is in good condition before she is mated, neither too fat nor too thin. Her food intake should not be altered during the first 4 weeks of her pregnancy, and if a complete formula is being fed there is no need to use additional vitamin or mineral supplements.

From the 5th week food intake should be gradually increased. During the last three weeks, food intake will often increase by up to one and a half times the normal level.

As abdominal pressure increases with the size of the fetuses, smaller meals fed more frequently may be helpful. For example, feed 3 meals per day from 5 weeks, 4 meals per day from 6 weeks, 5 meals per day from 7 weeks, and 6 meals per day in the last 2 weeks.

What should I do to prepare for whelping?

From the time of mating, many dogs show behavioural changes. Most develop an unusually sweet and loving disposition and demand more affection and attention. However, some may become uncharacteristically



irritable. Some experience a few days of vomiting ("morning sickness"), followed by the development of a ravenous appetite which persists throughout the pregnancy.

During the last week or so of pregnancy, the bitch often starts to look for a secure place for delivery. Pet bitches often become confused, wanting to be with their owners and at the same time wanting to prepare for the forthcoming event. It is therefore a good idea to get the bitch used to the place where you want her to have her puppies well in advance of whelping but even then some bitches insist on having their pups in close proximity to the owner. Under these circumstances it is better to let the bitch have way and then when she has finished, gently try moving her to the place that she should have already been introduced to some days or weeks previously.

However, some bitches are very determined and under these circumstances less trauma is caused if, with reason, her demands are met or at least some compromise is achieved, e.g. a bitch that wants to nurse the puppies on your bed is quietly moved to a whelping box in a corner of the bedroom.

Similarly some bitches need the owner present during the whole time of delivery and if they are left alone they are likely to endeavor to delay delivery of the puppies which can create subsequent problems – compromise is the name of the game!

Prior to the time of delivery, a whelping box should be selected and placed in a secluded place, such as a closet or a dark corner. The box should be large enough for the dog to move around freely, but have low enough sides so that she can see out and you can reach inside to give assistance, if needed.

The bottom of the box should be lined with several layers of newspapers. These provide disposable, absorbent bedding which the bitch can tear up and reorganize according to her own requirement. At the same time they will absorb the fluids which are always more copious than you would ever expect at the time of whelping. If sufficient thickness of newspaper is laid at the outset, the upper, soiled layers may be removed with minimal interruption to the mother and her newborn puppies.

Room temperature needs to remain at 21-23 degrees but a heat lamp at one end of the whelping box at 27 degrees allows the puppies to stay warm but not overheat the bitch. Heat can be purchased online at

<http://www.petnetwork.com.au/>

We strongly encourage an abdominal radiograph at about 8 weeks pregnancy to count the puppies. This way we know if the bitch suddenly stops during labour if there are more puppies to come or not.