

Breeding from your bitch – a guide for Owners

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The majority of bitches reach puberty at about six to seven months old, although four months to two years is also not unusual. The bitch coming 'on heat' or being 'in season' marks the onset of puberty. The season lasts approximately three weeks, although there can be a large variation between bitches as well as variation in an individual bitch at different seasons.

During the first stage, which lasts approximately ten days, the vulva becomes very swollen and pink, there is a blood stained discharge and the bitch becomes attractive to dogs. At this stage she is likely to allow any mating to take place.

In the second stage the vulva becomes more enlarged and reddened and the discharge becomes straw coloured. Most bitches will stand for a dog at this stage. Ovulation occurs spontaneously on about the second day of this stage i.e. about 11 days after the first signs of heat are seen, although again this can vary.

In an unmated bitch, heat is followed by a third stage, which lasts for up to ninety days. This stage has no obvious signs but due to hormonal changes taking place many bitches show signs of false pregnancy at this time. The frequency that a season occurs again is very variant, but any time between five to ten months is quite normal. Intervals of less than four months are often associated with infertility. There can be a huge variety within the different breeds.

It is important to consider very carefully whether or not to breed from your bitch, and there are several important facts you need to be fully aware of. Firstly, there are no medical advantages to a bitch having a litter before neutering; secondly there are a lot of costs involved. There is the purchase of special facilities, extra food for the bitch and puppies, and the possibility of expensive vets fees. More often than not the sale of puppies does not cover the total expense involved in raising a litter. You will also need to consider the space you have available. The puppies will need enough room to run around for several weeks until they are ready to go to their new homes, and don't forget that at this stage they will not be house trained. You will need to ensure that you have enough free time to be with the bitch and puppies and to show prospective purchasers the litter. In all you probably need to allow about three months to devote to the whole procedure. Finding enough suitable homes is often the most difficult part of breeding your litter. You need to vet any prospective owners very carefully to ensure that they are completely suitable and be wary of anyone who is reluctant to give you all the information you request. Finally you need to be prepared to have any puppies back from their new homes should the need arise.

It is best for a bitch to have her first litter between the ages of sixteen months and two and a half years depending on the breed, and preferably not after the age of five if she is being bred for the first time. It is very important that your bitch is in fact suitable to breed from: she should be of good temperament and conformation and free from any breed specific defects. She should also (if pedigree) be hip and eye tested if it is indicated, and have a clean veterinary examination. These points should also apply to the stud dog. If your bitch is a maiden it is best to choose an experienced dog. The mating arrangements are best left to an experienced person who will know how to handle any problems that may arise.

Traditionally bitches are mated twice to help ensure that the union is successful although, as many owners find, it often only takes the once! If you experience problems getting your bitch pregnant, please consult surgery as there are several tests that can pinpoint the exact time that the bitch should be mated and so increase the chances of success.

Assuming that your bitch is healthy and of acceptable weight she will not require additional food during the first 2/3 of her pregnancy. In the last third the rations should be increased gradually until by week nine she is having 30% more food. You should also ensure that the diet you feed contains a good amount of good quality protein. If you are feeding a suitable mainstream food you will not need to supplement with any vitamins or minerals. It is especially important that you don't give excessive calcium at this stage, as this will increase the risk of eclampsia. You may find that she needs several small meals daily towards the end of her pregnancy as her stomach tend to get quite restricted by the pups and so she can only eat a small amount at a time.

The pregnant bitch will need some exercise, but as the pregnancy develops be guided by her as to how much exercise she is happy with. Continue to groom her but avoid any shampoos that may contain harmful substances. In longhaired breeds it can be helpful to clip the hair from around the rear end and underneath.

Bitches should be wormed prior to mating, and after whelping along with the puppies. Wormers should be obtained from your veterinary practice, as it is important that you follow a strict regime to ensure that the puppies and bitch are free from *Toxocara Canis*, which can pose a public health risk.

Note – We do NOT recommend worming in pregnancy at all due to problems that can occur from the chemicals used.

It is also important to ensure that your bitch is adequately protected against the killer diseases (parvovirus, distemper and hepatitis) by a booster vaccination or a blood test assessment.

The duration of pregnancy is usually about sixty-three days, although fifty-eight to sixty-eight days post mating is acceptable. Signs to look out for are a slow weight gain, which increases in the last third of pregnancy. A change in body shape is visible by the sixth week, and at this time foetal movements may be felt. Mammary development occurs and the nipples enlarge and darken during the second half of pregnancy. Pregnancy can be confirmed either by an ultrasound sixteen to twenty days post mating or by manual examination by your vet three to four weeks post mating.

Owners often make a whelping box, which should be placed in a quiet, dry and draught free area where it can be carefully watched with the minimum of disturbance. High walls on three sides to keep draughts out (and puppies in!) and a warm area that can keep the bitch and puppies at about 80°F for the first week after Whelping are crucial. It is important that the bitch has time to get used to her 'maternity quarters', so start to use it from about two weeks before the due date. The box should be in the place where the puppies are to be born and grow up in. It is a good idea to arrange a contact should you need assistance, this can often be a local breeder or the stud dog owner. It is also prudent to ensure that you have access to transport should you need to come into the surgery, which can often be during the night.

Your whelping kit should be prepared well in advance and should include the veterinary surgery contact number, and out of hours procedure; hot water bottles and towels; a good supply of newspaper to use as bedding during whelping; nail brush, soap and towels for hand washing; a clock or watch to time intervals between deliveries and contractions; antiseptic solution; plastic rubbish sacks for disposal of soiled bedding etc and old pieces of clean cloth for drying the puppies.

Normal whelping (which happens in most cases!) usually starts by a drop in the bitches rectal temperature from a normal 101 to 102°F (38.3 to 38.9°C) down to 97 to 99°F (36.1 to 37.2°C). This usually ensures a delivery within 24hours. The bitch also commonly shows signs of nest building, seeks out dark places and tends to want to be alone. The presence or absence of milk is too variable to be a reliable sign, as is vaginal discharge. A bitch will often refuse food for a while prior to whelping.

It should always be remembered that birth is a natural process and any interference should be kept to a minimum.

Labour is classified into three stages; in stage one the cervix dilates, in stage two the puppies are produced, and in stage three afterbirths are expelled. In animals with multiple birth stages two and three recur.

Stage One. The bitch often becomes restless and nervous. She often shivers and pants, may vomit and sometimes produces milk freely. This stage lasts for about four hours, but in maiden bitches it can be considerably longer.

Stage Two. Strong contractions become visible and the bitch will begin to strain. The waters may break and the bitch often begins to lick the vulval area. She will often lie on her side and will pant heavily. It is important that if no puppy appears after thirty minutes of straining you get veterinary advice.

The interval between puppies is very variable, but again if she strains for thirty minutes with no puppy you must get veterinary advice. Usually there are larger intervals between puppies at the beginning and end, and smaller intervals in the middle.

Each puppy will need to be cleaned and possibly fed by the dam, please don't remove them until whelping is finished, as this will really upset the bitch.

Stage Three. Each puppy should be accompanied by afterbirth. You should, if possible count each one. It is natural for the bitch to want to eat the placentas. At the end of stage three she will start to relax and start to nurse the puppies contentedly.

It is important to be aware that the 'waters' and discharge in a bitch are green in colour, and that a greenish or dark red discharge is normal for up to three weeks post whelping.

A few deliveries will not be straightforward. If your bitch is experiencing any difficulty then veterinary advice should be sought. The only assistance you should give is gentle traction if a puppy is at least half way delivered. It should also be noted that most causes of difficult whelping are inherited, and one should question the wisdom of breeding from that bitch again.

If the membranes around the puppies' head do not rupture at birth, it is important to clear the nose and mouth quickly so that the puppy can breathe. The bitch usually does this, but if she doesn't, the membranes can be torn with the fingers and the puppies' mouth gently wiped. If for any reason the bitch doesn't lick and clean the puppies, then each one can be gently dried with a towel. Newly born puppies are unable to control their body temperature efficiently and chilling is rapidly fatal. A hot water bottle wrapped in a towel is a good means of ensuring they are kept warm, BUT it is important that the temperature is not too hot, as overeating can prove fatal as well. Puppies are usually born headfirst; some come hind legs first with no problem. If a puppy is breach, or has its head back, veterinary advice should be urgently sought.

It is sensible to get your vet to check the bitch and puppies on the day after whelping. The uterus will be checked to see if it is empty and the mammary glands and milk supply will also be checked. It is important to ensure that the bitch has urinated during the first 24 hours. Some bitches refuse to leave a litter at first so may need some encouragement. Giving birth is a tiring process, so it is important that for the first few days the bitch is left quietly and has as few visitors as possible. This is an important bonding time for pups and dam so they should not be disturbed.

The aftercare of your bitch consists mainly of observing her. It is important she eats and drinks normally and is able to urinate and pass motions. Her discharge should diminish gradually and should not be dark, smelly or profuse. Her mammary glands should be checked daily and should not be hot or swollen. This is important because if mastitis occurs and the bitch becomes feverish and unwell, her milk can dry up and the litter may need to be hand reared. The puppies should all be spending their time feeding and sleeping.

It is important to check each puppy daily and to watch that they are all feeding well. They open their eyes when they are about twelve days old.

The bitch will now need an increased amount of food, especially if she is feeding a big litter. It is important to realise that her requirements go up as the puppies get bigger (until they are weaned). A rough guide is that by four weeks she should be having just under four times the amount of food she was having before. A lot of breeders feed ad lib at this stage. The food must be balanced for lactation, and very high in calories and protein. Cold and starvation are the most common cause of death in newborn puppies. A warm and well-fed puppy should cry, feed and sleep at regular intervals. Its tummy should be rounded and 'plump'. It is prudent to weigh the puppies daily in the first ten days to ensure daily weight gain. Milk should be the puppies' sole food for the first three weeks, but after that they tend to take an interest in the bitches food as they start to explore their surroundings. It is important that you wean the puppies on to a suitable diet, as at this stage many deficiencies can occur. Puppies should be offered food in a shallow bowl and carefully supervised. Gradually they should be fed away from the mother and you should aim for independence at seven to eight weeks. At this stage they should be eating four substantial meals a day, and should have started a worming program.

You should be starting to socialise the litter before they go to their new homes as this helps to ensure that they grow into well balanced individuals. Contact your surgery if you need advice on this process. All the puppies should continue to grow and thrive. If any single one causes any concern then you should contact your vet.

You need to register a pedigree litter with the kennel club, and if your bitch is insured most companies will, on request, give cover notes for the puppies when they go to their new homes.

Finally if at any stage the bitch rejects some or all of the litter, they are often not right in some way, so rather than hand rear get a full examination by your vet first.