

Taking care of your pregnant dog

Congratulations! Your dog is about to become a mother. Here are some things to keep in mind while caring for your pregnant dog.

Before delivery

Your dog may require regular deworming, heartworm preventives, and flea control while she is pregnant. Fortunately, many parasite control products can be used during this critical time. Consult your veterinarian about which one is right for your pet.

If your dog is in good physical condition, she will have fewer problems delivering her pups. Pregnant dogs require regular exercise during pregnancy. Weight control is important because more delivery problems are seen in overweight dogs. While weight reduction is probably not advisable during pregnancy, regular exercise will counteract some of the problems associated with obesity. Going for a walk, chasing a ball or Frisbee, or doing any exercise your dog is accustomed to should be safe during pregnancy.

Nutrition is also important during pregnancy. Ask your veterinarian to recommend a high-quality, balanced dog food. Don't give your dog vitamin or mineral supplements, especially calcium supplements, because these could cause a nutritional imbalance. For the first six weeks of the pregnancy, feed your dog her normal amount of food. Gradually increase the amount of food during the final three weeks of the pregnancy so your dog's caloric intake reaches 1.5 times its normal amount. You may need to offer several small meals during the last three weeks because your dog's uterus enlarges in late pregnancy, reducing the amount of food her stomach can hold.

During pregnancy, you may notice vaginal discharges. Occasional mucus discharge is normal. Even if this discharge is pink-tinged, it is considered normal. If the discharge contains blood or pus, see your veterinarian immediately because it could indicate serious pregnancy complications. And be sure to isolate your dog from other dogs three weeks before to three weeks after delivery to reduce the possibility of exposure to disease.

A few weeks before delivery, carefully select a safe and secluded area that is draft-free and away from household traffic patterns. Provide a box that your dog can deliver her puppies in that is easy to clean. Ideally, the box should have a rail around it the puppies can move under to help prevent the mother from accidentally crushing them. Introduce your dog to the box about one week before the expected delivery date to allow your dog to become acclimated. Line the box with washable rugs or blankets to give puppies good footing for nursing and crawling, which helps their legs and feet develop properly.

During delivery

The first stage of labor lasts two to 12 hours. During this stage, the uterus starts to contract regularly and the cervix dilates. Your dog may show signs of nesting, nervousness, panting, shivering, loss of appetite, and vomiting.

When your dog starts experiencing stronger contractions and expels watery fluid, she is in the second stage of labor. The first puppy will enter your dog's pelvic canal, stimulating her to push more aggressively. As each puppy is expelled, your dog will usually break the thin, whitish membrane surrounding the puppy. Puppies may suffocate if these membranes are not removed from their nostrils shortly after birth. The normal interval between the delivery of puppies is 30 to 60 minutes. Rest periods are normal, particularly if your dog is delivering a large litter. During these rest periods, your dog will appear comfortable and care for the puppies already delivered.

You may notice a greenish-black uterine discharge, which is normal. If contractions last longer than one hour or rest periods last longer than four hours, you may need your veterinarian to step in and help. You should also consult your veterinarian if your dog has not delivered a puppy an hour and a half after the watery fluid is expelled. If you see a black, thick discharge and your dog has not shown signs of labor, call your veterinarian immediately.

During the third stage of labor, your dog will expel the placentas. She may eat the placentas and chew the umbilical cords free from the puppies. This placental tissue provides your dog protein and other nutrients, reducing the amount of food she'll need the first few days after delivery. The placentas usually follow each pup, but the passing of a placenta may be interrupted when another pup is delivered. If your dog develops a vaginal discharge that contains pus shortly after delivery, it may indicate retained placentas, so consult your veterinarian.

After delivery

A vaginal discharge is normal after delivery. You should monitor this discharge daily. Watch for a decreasing amount of discharge, a change in color from red to brown, and a change in consistency from watery to mucoid (resembling mucus). It should never have an odor. Your dog will expel most of the discharge in the first two weeks, but you may see small amounts over the following four to six weeks. Blood in the discharge after the first week is abnormal, so if you see any call your veterinarian.

You should also examine your dog's mammary glands every day. These glands provide colostrum and milk for the puppies to ingest. Firm and painful mammary glands may indicate mastitis, an inflammation of the mammary gland. If you catch this early, your veterinarian can show you how to apply hot compresses or perform milk stripping two to four times a day to keep the problem from getting more serious. In most cases, the puppies should still be able to nurse.

As for the puppies, have your veterinarian examine them soon after delivery. The puppies should ingest colostrum within the first 24 hours after birth. Weigh the puppies every day to document weight gain. The puppies should gain weight daily, although there may be a short lag in the first day or two after delivery. Weight loss or the absence of weight gain may mean serious problems, so consult your veterinarian.

Puppies cannot regulate their body temperatures, so you must keep them warm for the first two weeks of life. Drafts pose the greatest threat for puppies. You can provide supplemental heat sources, such as heating pads or heat lamps on low thermostat settings. Just make sure the puppies can get away from the heat source to avoid becoming too hot. The puppies should remain with their mother during the first several weeks; she will feed them, help keep them warm, stimulate them to urinate and defecate, and teach them appropriate canine interactions.

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