PREGNANCY AND WHELPING IN THE BITCH

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PREGNANCY AND WHelpING IN THE BITCH

Pregnancy in the bitch lasts on average 63 days, but it is not unusual for this to vary by a day or two either side of the expected “due date”.

Definite signs of pregnancy vary between individuals. The first visible evidence is usually an increase in the size of the abdomen. From about 6 weeks into the pregnancy, the teats and mammary glands may also increase in size.

As the bitch enters the last couple of weeks of her pregnancy, her appetite may become unpredictable, and she will perhaps be less inclined to play and exercise vigorously.

It is often easier for her to eat smaller, more frequent meals, rather than large quantities of food at one time.

INDICATIONS OF APPROACHING LABOUR

About 24 – 48 hours before the start of labour the bitch’s temperature usually drops, by up to two degrees below normal.

She may become restless and uneasy, and may refuse food, or vomit after eating.

The external genitalia become more prominent and a few hours before labour commences a sticky discharge may be seen.

If such signs are present, and labour does not start or if after some slight straining the bitch settles down again veterinary advice should be sought.

Feeding for Gestation and Lactation

Pre-Breeding

A bitch should start her pregnancy and finish her lactation weighing the same. The bitch should be fed good quality adult dried dog food. Feed the suggested quantity, releasing that the adjustment upward or downward may be needed to maintain optimum weight. No supplements are required and she should have ready access to clean water.

Gestation – weeks 1 – 4

The bitch should be fed good quality adult dog food as before. No increase in food levels is generally required. Most fetal growth occurs later in pregnancy; therefore the weight of the bitch should not change significantly at this time. No supplements are required and she should have ready access to clean water.

Gestation – week 5

Through the week the bitch should be gradually introduced to a good quality dried puppy food. By the end of the week, she should get the same quantity of food as in weeks 1 to 4 but it should now be all puppy food.

Gestation – weeks 6 – 9

The bitch’s daily intake of dried puppy food should gradually be increased so that at the time of whelping the quantity of food has been increased by 15-25% over that fed in week 5. During the last 10 days of gestation a heavily pregnant bitch may require several smaller meals throughout the day in order to consume all she requires. At whelping, the bitch’s weight should increase 25-25% from her pre-breeding weight. No supplements are required and excessive calcium during this period can be harmful.

Lactation

The lactating bitch should be allowed to feed ad-lib. Dried good-quality puppy food should always be available. Food should be restricted only if the bitch is becoming obese. No supplements are to be given and it is very important that clean water always be available. Food should be restricted at the time of weaning and the bitch should be gradually changed back on to good-quality dried adult food, at the quantity recommended for her optimum body weight.
**Canine Herpes Virus**

Canine Herpes Virus is a virus that has largely been ignored for many years, but it has become increasingly clear that the virus causes many more problems than was first thought. Like all herpes viruses, Canine Herpes Virus is highly infectious, and a recent study showed that more than 80% of dogs in England have been exposed to the virus at some time in their lives.

For most dogs, the virus is not thought to cause any significant problems. However it is now clear that CHV can be a significant cause of death in young puppies, and also causes smaller litter sizes and reduced weights of puppies.

Canine Herpes Virus attacks the placenta of the mother, starving the fetus of vital nutrients. This can lead to abortion, stillbirths, or re-absorption of the fetuses. (This is often mistaken for infertility when breeding dogs.)

Puppies that become infected before birth and survive may be under-weight and have a compromised immune system, which causes them to be more vulnerable to infection. If the puppy is infected after birth, Canine Herpes Virus is also known to be one of the factors in "fading puppy syndrome". This is when a pup does not suckle, loses weight and dies in spite of continual care.

As the infection is a virus, there is no cure for it. Infection is probably for life and can flare up repeatedly especially during periods of stress, such as pregnancy and whelping.

However, a vaccine is now available which although cannot prevent infection can significantly improve fertility rates and reduce early puppy deaths.

1st injection: from heat to 7-10 days after the presumed date of mating.

2nd injection: 1 to 2 weeks before the expected date of whelping.

**NORMAL LABOUR**

The process of labour can be divided into two main stages.

The first stage may last for a few hours, or even all day, and the bitch may seem a little uncomfortable or mildly distressed. (During this stage the womb will be starting mild contractions which will be positioning the puppies ready for delivery and helping the birth canal to relax.)

If during this stage a dark green or black discharge is seen in the absence of any obvious progress, seek veterinary advice.

The second stage follows from the first, and contractions now become much stronger and more obvious. The bitch often lies on her side and strains with each contraction, often panting and shivering at the same time. As the muscles of the womb relax again between contractions, so will she. This process continues until the pup is delivered, and may take some time, particularly for the first pup, or with a first litter.

If the bitch has been experiencing strong contractions for ½ to 1 hour with no visible progress, seek veterinary advice.

Most puppies are born head first, but it is also quite normal for some to be born hind feet first. It is quite normal to see greenish black or bloodstained fluid expelled from each pup.

If the membranes have not ruptured naturally by the time the puppy is born, and if the bitch does not immediately tear them herself, it is important to free the pup’s head without delay - until this is done the pup cannot breathe.

Once freed, the pup should start to breathe straight away. If signs of life are not obvious, then rubbing the puppy gently but firmly in a towel will often stimulate breathing; an experienced bitch will do this with vigorous licking as each pup is born.
One afterbirth should be delivered after each pup, and is usually eaten by the bitch, severing the umbilical cord. If there is a retained placenta, a womb infection may occur, so if a placenta is not delivered with each pup, seek veterinary advice. This is not an emergency.

The interval between puppies again varies, averaging 15 – 30 minutes, but it is sometimes much longer or shorter.

**If the interval is of 3 hours or more, and the bitch is unsettled and uncomfortable, seek veterinary advice.**

It takes a little time for the womb to return to normal after giving birth, and for a week or two afterwards it is quite usual to see a greenish or bloodstained discharge.

**If this discharge is continuous or excessive, or if it is foul smelling, particularly if the bitch is also off-colour, seek veterinary advice.**

It is also quite normal for the bitch to pass very dark or even black motions for the first few days, particularly if she has eaten the afterbirths and membranes.

Dogs and bitches all carry Roundworms, which at times of stress such as pregnancy and whelping, migrate through the bitch’s body and are then passed across to the unborn puppies via the bloodstream and placenta.

After the puppies are born, the roundworms are also passed through the milk to the puppies when they are suckling.

Roundworms deprive the puppies of nutrients, causing ill-thrift and a pot bellied appearance. In very severe cases, roundworms can be fatal.

It is our recommendation that pregnant bitches be wormed with Panacur daily from day 40 of pregnancy to two days after the puppies are born.

This will reduce the amount of worms present in the bitch, therefore reducing the amount passed on to the newborn pups. This will ensure that they receive all the nutrition from their mothers’ milk giving them the best possible start in life.

Puppies should also be wormed at two weeks of age with Panacur puppy suspension, and again at two-weekly intervals until 12 weeks of age.