

Female dog pregnancy care

If you've chosen to breed from your female dog (bitch), it's important to follow a protocol of careful healthcare and regular veterinary checks, to help ensure the safest pregnancy for the soon-to-be Mum and her pups.

What should I do to prepare my female dog for pregnancy?

Before breeding your bitch, it is best to consider the following:

- Do you have money set aside in case the mother or puppies need emergency medical care?
- Are you willing to find and carefully pick buyers for the puppies, to ensure they all go to good homes?
- Is your bitch healthy, with no known medical issues? Does she have a good temperament?
- Do you know a suitable entire male dog who is healthy, also with a good temperament?
- Would you be able to be present 24 hours a day for the first 3-4 weeks in case hand-feeding of the pups is required?

If you have decided to breed from your bitch, first ensure she is:

- **Healthy and normal weight** (not over- or under-weight, both of which can cause problems with the pups or with birthing)
- **Physically mature** - at least 1.5 years old in a small breed, and at least 2 years old in a large breed
- **Up-to-date with her vaccinations:**
 - Vaccinations should be completed BEFORE breeding, as the use of modified live vaccines is not recommended during pregnancy
 - Puppies rely on temporary protective antibodies passed to them through their mother's milk in the hours after birth.
 - Your bitch should at least be up-to-date with at least the **C3 vaccination** (parvovirus, distemper and hepatitis), but ideally also the **kennel cough vaccination** as well.
- **Up-to-date with her flea/tick/worming/heartworm prevention:**
 - It's important to continue to protect your bitch against common parasites during pregnancy and lactation (feeding the pups), as many parasites can be passed onto the developing pups during this time.
 - Many common products are labelled as safe for usage during pregnancy and lactation - we would recommend the combination of:
 - **Bravecto chew** every 3 months (protects against fleas and ticks)
 - **Milbemax tablet** every month (protects against heartworm and intestinal worms)
- On a good quality, balanced adult dog food

How will I know when my bitch is ready to mate?

Your female dog will show signs of **pro-oestrus** (coming into heat) as:

- Bloody discharge from her vulva
- Firm swelling of her vulva
- Licking her vulva
- Attracting male dogs, but NOT allowing them to mate with her yet.

This period usually lasts 7-10 days.

Your female dog will then enter the **oestrus** stage (the fertile period where successful mating can occur), which is seen as:

- Reduced amounts of vulval discharge, which is also lighter in colour
- Softer, puffy swelling of her vulva
- Being receptive to being mated with.

This period generally lasts from 3-10 days.

The period between one heat cycle and another (if a bitch has not fallen pregnant) is usually around 6 months.

How will I know if my bitch is pregnant?

To diagnose pregnancy, **abdominal ultrasound** can be done from **28-30 days** after the last mating to look for foetal heartbeats. This is simple pregnancy diagnosis and is NOT an accurate way to count pups. Ultrasound doesn't require sedation (unless your pet is very fearful), but your pet may need some of her belly fur shaved off, to allow good contact between her skin and the ultrasound probe.

From **Day 45** of pregnancy, **X-rays** can be done to count puppy skeletons (although it is safest to wait until **Day 50**, to ensure the skeletons are fully developed for the best images). It can still be difficult to accurately count pups this way (as pups can be stacked on top of each other - imagine trying to count grapes piled into a bowl, in black and white!), so please be aware that this is only a guideline as to how many pups you should expect, and NOT a guaranteed number.

Before her x-rays, your bitch should be starved of food on that morning, so that a large food-filled stomach doesn't block the view.

What special care should I give my bitch during pregnancy?

It is recommended that pregnant bitches are transferred onto a good quality, complete puppy diet, such as **Hills Science Diet Puppy** (over about a week, with the new food gradually mixed in to prevent tummy upset). This is because from Day 30 of pregnancy, your bitch's energy and nutrient requirements will significantly increase. These puppy diets generally give label guidelines on how to gradually increase food quantities throughout pregnancy, to ensure sufficient nutrition during the second half of pregnancy and throughout lactation. Multiple smaller daily meals are often best due to reduced stomach capacity.

It is not recommended to supplement further with any vitamins, and supplementing with unnecessary calcium or Vitamin A can cause problems in the bitch or pups.

It is fine for your bitch to continue exercising whilst pregnant. Brisk short walks or swimming are generally best – avoid strenuous exercise such as agility. During late pregnancy, bitches with large litters may need their walk length reduced to a gentle daily potter. Be very careful not to exercise pregnant brachycephalic (snub-nosed breeds such as Bulldogs or Pugs) bitches in hot or humid weather, as this can put them at risk of dangerous overheating or breathing difficulties.

Continue your bitch's worming/tick/flea/heartworm prevention routines as usual throughout pregnancy and lactation, with pregnancy-safe products such as those mentioned above (check labels or phone us for advice if you are unsure).