**"PREPARATION FOR BIRTHING A NORMAL DELIVER"**

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Birthing, or "whelping" a litter of puppies is one of the most exciting times for the breeder. After months or even a year or more of preparation, we approach the calculated "due date". Over time, I have seen how critically important it is to gain as much knowledge as possible about the whelping process, allowing us to determine if the whelping is normal or complicated and, whether or not your interference is needed. "Being there" for your female while she whelps will be one of the most personal times you will ever have with your dog-she will not only trust in you, but relies on you as well to help her through.

Well before your litter is due to arrive, learn as much as you can about the "normal" birthing process so you don"t let her down out of ignorance. Plan to be available to her and by her side and not careless. So very important is that during her gestation, she continues with reasonable daily exercise to keep her muscle tone strong. Pushing the babies out will be much easier for her.

Swimming in the early weeks of gestation when the cervix is not tightly closed yet, may not be the best way for her to exercise as she can "pick up" bacteria from the water that can then track into the uterus. Her first month, she should continue to do all forms of exercise that she' used to doing and as she begins to get big, walking and hiking keeps her muscles toned and builds endurance. In the first four weeks of the dog' approximate 63 day gestation, the puppies within her are tiny embryos dividing rapidly into organs and body structure and don"t require "calories"; they only require the nutrients available from mom' bloodstream.

However, during the last three weeks before the expected due date, the puppies will need additional calories as they put on weight themselves. The bitch' diet must be more nourishing during gestation and many breeders feed their bitches a very good quality puppy kibble, increasing her normal amount fed the last three weeks to nearly double that of what she was fed originally. Remember that she should be "fit" and not fat. Your veterinarian should be advised of her pregnancy at least a month before she is due to whelp.

I believe it is a very good idea to have an x-ray and prenatal exam done the last week of her pregnancy not only to "count" puppy skulls and spines, but as well, to be assured your vet is available to you for any problems you may encounter at whelping. Ready yourself by knowing the signs and symptoms immediately preceding actual birthing. "Maiden" bitches vary greatly in their behavior prior to whelping. Some whelp incredibly easy- I had a black female of medium size many years ago, who never did any more than squat as if she was about to urinate, then passed a puppy, cleaned it and then began to cuddle and encourage it to nurse.

I remember sitting nearby ready to assist with a towel over my shoulder, only to watch her whelp puppy-after-puppy this way ! Many first-timers will tear their bedding apart as they scratch the bottom of the whelping box, whimper, and even jump in-and-out of the box until the puppy is actually in the birth canal. Learn to know the difference between behaviors that can last for hours or even days before actual whelping and signs that birth is "imminent". · Days before she is expected to birth, her vulva (the opening to the vaginal canal), will become soft and may have a clear mucous discharge. Her body temperature should be taken rectally each day and recorded.

Most dogs will have a drop in body temperature from the normal 101.5 to 99 degrees approximately 24 hours before actual birthing. Most females very close to birthing will refuse food. When actual "straining" show contractions are becoming regular, many females will lay stretched out in their whelping boxes and remain quiet for periods of time. As birth of a puppy approaches, she will pant and breathe heavily and turn her head around to look at her rear end.

She will appear restless.In the process of a puppy moving into the birth canal, many females will press their rear against the whelping box and "strain".When she begins this "straining", the breeder should note how long it is before the arrival of the first puppy delivered. Should you need to call your veterinarian, his first question is often what time did she actually start active labor and pushing? In "normal" or uncomplicated whelping, the "strains" should not continue for more than about an hour-and-a-half before a puppy comes.

Each puppy is encased inside a sac of fluid that protects the puppy while it' in the uterus, acting as a cushion. At birth, instead of the puppy' unprotected head coming out first, the contractions of the uterus squeeze the "water sac" through the vaginal canal and the vagina, and a bulging-bag is seen coming out of the vulva. The bag can burst and the puppy come very shortly afterwards.

Often, one strong contraction will expel the puppy entirely encased inside the sac' membrane. The bitch' instinct is to use her mouth to tear the sac open with her teeth, giving the baby air and then licking the puppy to stimulate it to breathe. She will then chew the umbilical cord, freeing the baby from it' placenta. Many bitches will radically eat this afterbirth out of instinct, giving them calories and protein.

These females will may not eat meals the breeder provides for a day or two. (Wild dogs would "clean up" in this manner to protect the litter from predators, getting rid of the smell of after-birth and as well, she had no need to leave her litter alone to go out and hunt for food). Many breeders though don"t let their dogs have the chance to gobble up placentas, and prefer to count and then discard them. The new mom should also lick the puppy vigorously to dry it off as well as to stimulate it to cry and breathe deeply.

The breeder should sit near-by the bitch, encouraging her through the birthing process with a soft and calming tone of voice. It is extremely important not to be anxious or loud, for if her human care-taker seems worried or frantic, she may become uneasy. I personally believe the breeder should not get too involved and let her have a chance to birth as naturally as possible, yet be there should she need any help. If she does not begin to tear away the sac herself, use a rough towel to expose the head and wipe the mouth and nose clean first.

Maiden bitches often need help with the first puppy or two before their "instincts" take over. After the sac has been removed, tie off the umbilical cord with a piece of dental floss or fishing line 1€? from the belly and cut with sharp, clean scissors. If the puppy is not moving, hold it nose-toward-floor and rub it' chest and it' back vigorously with a towel. It is critical to expel any fluid in the mouth and lungs. Bulb syringes should be used to suck fluid from the mouth and throat. To expel fluid remaining in the lungs as much as possible, firmly hold the puppy in both hands supporting the head and neck, the head facing away from your body.

Starting with it held up overhead, swing it quickly downward between your legs that are spread somewhat apart. Angle puppy' head downward toward the floor and continue rubbing it' chest and then it' back with the towel until it' crying and moving. Before giving the puppy back to mom, dab each cord stump with iodine or beta dine to cleanse it. Scissors and any other "instruments" used should be soaked in rubbing alcohol for at least a half-hour before use. (Have your birthing aids set up nearby before puppies begin coming.)

Place the mouth of the newborn puppy on a teat to nurse and allow the bitch time to lick and bond before the next puppy comes. If you decide to let the bitch out of the whelping box to potty, watch her closely so she doesn't have a puppy outside. The next puppy born should come between a half-hour and never more than three hours apart. I place half of a very small crate or a low-sided box in the corner of the whelping box, and inside, have a heating pad plugged in and set on medium heat covered by a towel. As the bitch begins to ready herself for the next puppy' birth, I place the previous puppy in this warmed box so it is out-of-the-way and protected from being stepped on.

She can see her baby is there and even reach into the box to nuzzle and lick it. Record the weight and time of birth for each puppy. Based on the x-ray prior to whelping, you will have a good idea whether all puppies have been born or not. Your veterinarian should examine the bitch within a day after birthing. He will probably give an injection of oxytocin to ensure all remaining bits of placenta are expelled from her uterus. Avoid the temptation to have people over to "show off" the new babies, and give her a few days to bond and have some quiet time. Visitors can make her nervous and she may step on her babies and hurt them or even kill them. Knowing what "normal" whelping consists of will help you know what to expect and to take the correct actions.