



FEATURE

Preparation for Whelping

Extracts from **THE DOG OWNER'S MANUAL**
by Dr Karen Hedberg BVSc

The Whelping Room

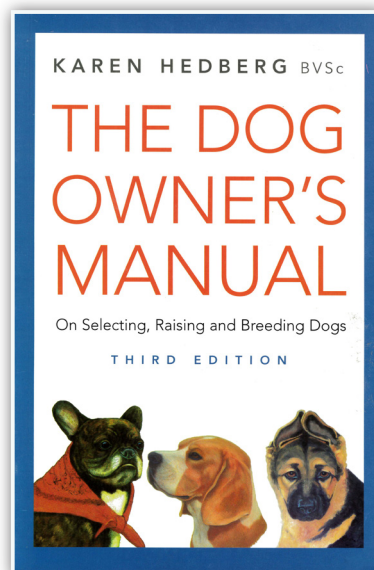
The Whelping Room should preferably be well insulated so that the temperature can be easily controlled if need be. Quite often, however, the whelping area is either the laundry, a back bedroom, the garage or a corner of the kennel block.

If you are building a kennel block, try to have a reasonably isolated area that can be partitioned off from the view of other dogs and the noise of the rest of the kennels.

If you have enough money and space, provide a separate room in which to whelp the bitch and raise the puppies. Ideally, have a kennel area for the bitch and the whelping box within the room. Access to an outside run or a puppy run is most useful as the puppies grow older. Separate hygiene facilities, such as a sink and hot water, could be added.

Whelping Boxes

The principle involved here is to provide an area for the bitch to have her puppies, where the puppies are safe and preferably there will be some means of temperature control. The size of the bitch will obviously be the determining factor in the size of the box. The length should be such that the bitch can lie flat out on her side and sleep comfortably. The width can be the same, although it is usually two-thirds the length which is sufficient for the bitch to lie sideways.





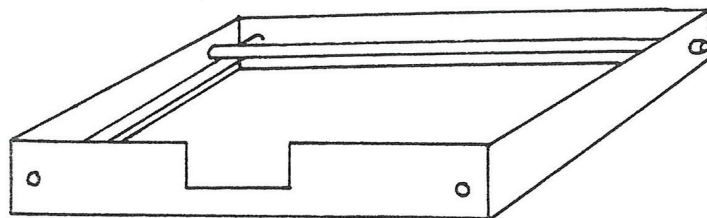
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Plans for Whelping Boxes

Whelping boxes vary tremendously and one could carry out a fascinating study of all the variations and the reasons for them.

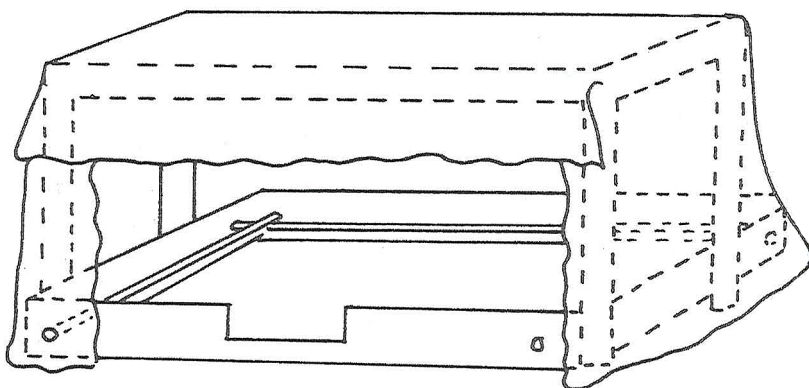
1. Frame only Whelping Box

This is basically four boards nailed together, with dowel rods placed 5-10cm out and up from the corners and moved further out and up with the increasing size of the breed. The heavier the breed, the more necessary the rails become, as many bitches of the larger breeds are rather clumsy with their puppies. These act as 'pig rails' which the puppies can roll under when the bitch suddenly moves or sits down without checking to see who is underneath. These rails should be sufficiently high so that the puppies can easily go in and out of the 'safe' areas. Usually, only three rails are used with the front section, where the bitch gets in and out of the box, having no rail.



The advantage of this type of whelping box is that it is easy to move, is useful as a temporary box, and can be placed over newspapers on top of a sheet of linoleum and set up anywhere you care to whelp the bitch. The drawback of this type of box is the lack of temperature control but it can be quite adequate in hot weather.

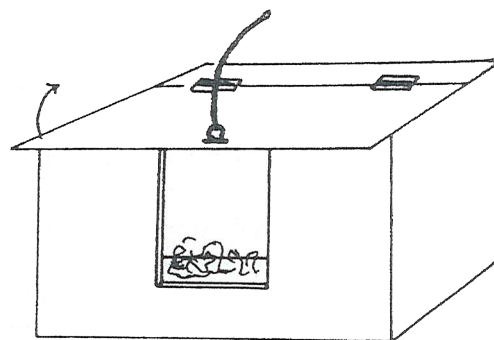
2. Frame and Floor Whelping Box



This type of whelping box is heavier but far more sturdy. The 'pig rails' can be removable with a pin and hook arrangement, allowing more room for the puppies as they get older (it stops the bars from being eaten as the puppies start to teethe). Provision can be made at the front of the box to have slotted rails added in, so the height at the front of the box can be raised as the puppies grow larger and try to climb out. The sides can be made of any height. This box is a very commonly seen variant but still does not offer good temperature control for the colder climates, where the heat needs to be retained down near the puppies.

3. Cave-type whelping box (i.e, with a lid)

This type of whelping box is the ideal temperature control, particularly in colder climates. The same basic box can be used as the frame and floor-whelping box but a roofed or cave effect is created. If you wish to convert the previous box into this style, use an old table placed over the top of the box and drape a blanket over the sides and part of the front. This will stop any drafts and prevent any heat from being lost. The bitch will feel more secure and, if need be, the sides can be raised as the temperature rises during the day. Remember, heat rises!



Another way to do this is to have a hinged lid placed over the top of a three-sided whelping box. You can lift the lid to see how the puppies are and the bitch feels very secure. As the puppies get older, or when less warmth is required, the lid can be lifted and held in an elevated position by a chain. Slotted bars can still be used at the front of the box as can the 'pig rails' around the sides.

The enclosed box has the great advantage of good heat control, whereby the heat is kept down near the puppies. Heating bills are considerably reduced and may even be eliminated in some areas. Often all that is needed is an electric blanket under the puppies set on low, even in cold weather. The enclosed area also keeps the bitch very relaxed, as it is the natural instinct of a bitch to go and hide in a cave or dark corner to have her puppies.

There are many more intricate ways and means for you to make the bitch feel secure and at the same time achieve good temperature control.



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Be prepared

Get the whelping box ready at least 4-5 days prior to whelping. Ideally, it should be long and wide enough for the bitch to stretch out on her side. If covered, it should be high enough to allow the bitch to stand and turn around.

As previously mentioned, with the bigger breeds, it is a good idea to have a small bar about 10cm high and 10cm out around the sides. This is a roll bar to prevent the bitch from squashing the puppies and can be necessary as many bigger bitches are very careless when sitting down and can easily squash puppies in the first few days.

Bedding Materials for Whelping Boxes

NEWSPAPER is the best bedding to use while the bitch is whelping. It is readily available, easily ripped up by the bitch, and soaks up excess fluids well. While whelping, wet sections can quickly be removed and replaced with dry ones. When the bitch has finished whelping, remove all the wet papers and replace them with new, clean ones. Put an old blanket or sheet down on top of this and change this daily. Puppies need to be able to grip the surface of the whelping box with their feet. Ideally, puppies should be kept on clean, dry bedding at all times.

I suggest that a sheet (in summer) or a blanket (in winter) is put on top of the newspaper layer, as the puppies have a tendency to slip and slide on the newspaper.

The top covering and any damp newspaper should be changed at least daily. Newspaper is also great to line puppy runs and toilet train puppies on, as they start to venture outside the whelping box. It is easy to roll up dirty papers and dispose of them via normal rubbish collection.



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STRAW is too hot to use in summer, as it retains a lot of heat. If you are going to use straw, I would be inclined to wait until after the bitch has whelped and been cleaned up before using it, as it tends to retain moisture and stick to the puppies. Straw should be changed regularly as it can get damp and mouldy and it harbours fleas. It may get into the puppies' eyes once they start to open and can be the cause of conjunctivitis. Straw is more commonly used in colder climates, as it retains heat.

VET BED/DRY BED is a synthetic material that was originally developed for the prevention of bed sores in humans. A vet bed is easily washed and has the advantage that any urine or fluids soak straight through it. The vet bed has two major drawbacks:

- One disadvantage is that newborn puppies nuzzle into the vet bed trying to find a nipple to suck (mistaking it for their mother).
- This, in turn, leads to the second disadvantage where puppies can inhale the fluff, which can cause severe respiratory distress.

The safe way to use this material is either to cover the vet bed with a sheet or wait until the puppies are at least 5-6 days of age before using it. By 5-6 days of age, puppies have learned what 'mother' smells like and generally will not bother hunting for her in the depths of the vet bed.



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Bedding Materials for Whelping Boxes

BLANKETS

Cotton blankets in summer and woollen blankets in winter are the best and easiest means of covering the bottom of the whelping boxes. Have a thick layer of newspaper underneath followed by the blanket on top. A daily change of the top cover, particularly with large litters, keeps the puppies clean and dry. The newspaper may only have to be changed every 2-3 days this way or more frequently depending on the number and age of the puppies.

BEAN BAGS are good for use in the whelping box, especially in winter. The air between the beans retains the heat extremely well from an electric blanket

(on the lowest level only). Bean bags are very good for the prevention of and use with 'swimmers,'* as the beans shift underfoot as the puppies move.

This makes the puppies exercise more and they cannot lie flat, as the surface is constantly changing. The depth of the bean bag need only be about 10cm. Bean bags are, however, not appropriate for large or giant breeds as the puppies cannot escape as readily from the descending bitch.



Temperature Control for the first 10 days

Puppies cannot control their body temperature for the first 5-6 days of life. This makes them extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in temperature, particularly with the cold. Puppies that have to cope with extremes of temperature use up their energy reserves trying to keep either warm or cool, depending on the season. Puppies will fail to thrive and can quickly die due to adverse temperature conditions.

During the second two weeks, in hot weather, you will need some means for keeping the room cool in the daytime. In cold weather, heat will be needed throughout the night. By three weeks, the puppies are usually capable of controlling their body temperatures. However, thinner-coated breeds will appreciate any extra heat in cold weather, so a good, snug kennel house (or whelping box) can be very advantageous.

It is, therefore, very important to be ready before the bitch is due to whelp.

Have the whelping room secure from drafts and be prepared for the worst, be it summer or winter. It is better to be over-prepared than be racing around desperately at the last minute, or after whelping, in order to save the puppies' lives.

* **'Swimmers'** are puppies that look flat from the top of the back to the chest. It will move around in a fashion similar to a child first learning to swim. The rib cage will feel flattened out and the puppy is usually unable to stand, particularly with the hind legs, and has difficulty moving around the box. Causes are usually due to the puppy being overheated or fat.

Checking Temperature Conditions:

- The easiest way to check puppies is to touch them; they should be warm, not cold to the touch.
- Puppies that are warm will loosely spread out over the box.
- Cold puppies will huddle in a pile and be very grizzly.
- Hot puppies will spread out from each other and if they are too hot they will be screaming.
- At the right temperature, puppies are quiet and warm to the touch.

In Summer

The puppies must be kept cool in the heat of the day if the temperature is high. If the puppies are very hot, they will spread out all over the box and will be yelling and screaming. If you find them like this, cool them down by wiping them all over with a wet cloth, particularly over the head and belly – they will usually quieten down very quickly.

Give them a few drops of water once they have settled – you can add a small amount of electrolyte salts to the water but it must be fairly diluted. If the puppies are thirsty, keep giving the water slowly. Once rehydrated and cool, they will nurse from the mother.



The best way to keep puppies cool is to have a fan in the room. Have the fan blowing over the box to circulate the air in the room, but do not have the fan blowing air directly onto the puppies. If it is very hot, place wet towels under the puppies, but only over half the box. If the puppies start to get cold, they will move off the wet towels and onto the dry sections.

In Winter - Remember that hot air rises

The problem is reversed during the colder months. It is harder to keep the temperature of the puppies constant, especially at night.

Heaters

Do not use fan heaters as they cause the air to dry out and the movement of air creates a chill effect. Use a bar heater or radiator instead. It is a good idea to have an electric blanket under the puppies, or a heated whelping box (well covered by a thick layer of papers with either a blanket or a bean bag on top). Never have either of these at top heat as you may 'cook' the puppies; i.e., they may overheat from underneath. Usually put the box or blanket on low, or on medium if it is very cold, during the first couple of nights.

Caves/dens

The best idea for conserving heat in winter is to create a 'cave' effect. You can do this by having a lid on your whelping box or by placing a table over the top of the whelping box. Place a blanket over the table and drape it around the sides, leaving a smaller entrance at the front (see cave-type whelping box illustration on page 20). In this fashion, any heat is kept in and around the puppies. There can be a sack or blanket that can be lowered or raised over most of the entrance at night time.

This method also considerably reduces your heating bill, as the bitch's heat is kept down near the puppies together with whatever additional heating that you supply.

As a cheap, but very effective means of heating the 'cave', hang an electrician's light inside the top and about 10 to 15cm down from the ceiling of the cave. A 40 or 60 watt light (for larger areas) is ample to provide a steady heat source. With this type of heating, where the heat is kept in the cave, no other heat source is required in the room. As the light globe is within a wire cage, it is safe to be left on, even when the bitch is unattended.

After 7-10 days, the heat source can be turned off during the day, depending on the weather. By 14-20 days, it may be possible to turn the heating off at night. Any external heat source must be very safe, in both position and stability of construction. A heater should never be left where it can be knocked over.

With very thin-coated breeds, these puppies often require heating for longer periods, depending on the local temperature extremes.

The temperature of the whelping room should always be assessed from the puppies' point of view, i.e., from near the floor, not where your head is when you are standing up in the whelping room.