

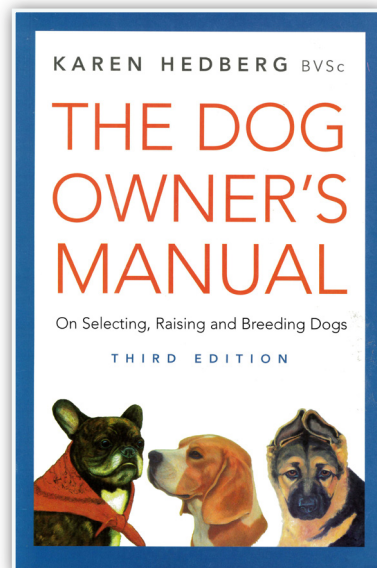


FEATURE

Preparation for Whelping

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

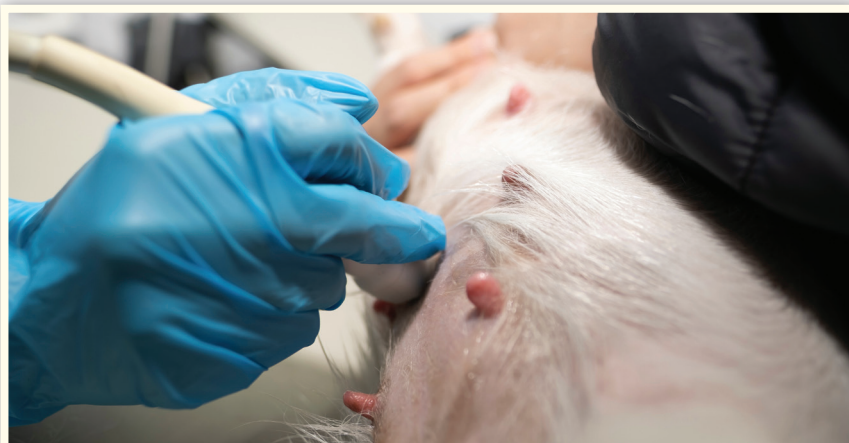
No matter how many books are read on the subject, few owners actually believe that their bitch will cope very well with little or no assistance during whelping. Others can go to the opposite extreme of ignoring the bitch entirely and leaving her to whelp on her own. With some novice owners, this may be quite understandable but owners' and bitches' temperaments can vary widely. However, I believe that the person who decided to mate the bitch and particularly the careless person who allowed the bitch to 'get out,' has a responsibility at least to be present and give moral support to the bitch.



LAST WEEK (or minute check-up) - Particularly for novice owners and Maiden Bitches

A check-up in the last 5-6 days of pregnancy is most useful to all parties concerned. The vet is notified that the litter is nearly due, the health of the bitch is checked and the owners are hopefully reassured that all is going well.

Bitches can be x-rayed in the last week if you want to know the size and number of puppies, and/or have an ultrasound (see pictured right) to check on heart rates and ensure the puppies are alive and well. With bitches with a history of whelping problems, it can be advisable to know ahead of time whether the possibility of a caesarean is on the cards. If the bitch is a maiden bitch and/or of a breed that frequently needs caesareans, an internal examination of the pelvis is recommended.



Planned Caesareans

Large-headed breeds, e.g. Pekingese, Dandie Dinmont Terriers, Bulldogs (of all kinds), Bull Terriers, Staffordshire Bull Terriers and Chihuahuas, must be watched closely during whelping, as they are all breeds that have puppies with large head sizes, but bitches that often have small pelvic diameters.

I would strongly recommend that in breeds that frequently have caesareans, the bitch has an internal pelvic examination about a week before she is due. This can, of course, be done at any time (even prior to mating), but definitely before they are due to whelp.

The normal pelvic shape internally is a slightly broad 'U' shape. Bitches who are extremely likely to require a caesarean have a very narrow 'V'-shaped pelvis internally. Structurally, these bitches will find it almost impossible to pass large headed or large-shouldered puppies.

With bitches that are narrow in the pelvis, a planned caesarean should be arranged ahead of time, by having exact dates. With progesterone blood tests and timing of the mating, your veterinarian can determine very accurately the time of conception and hence the optimal time for a caesarean (63 days from ovulation is the average).

Bitches that have had a history of previous caesareans should similarly have very accurate dates for precisely the same reasons. Also, bitches that have had car accidents in the past that fractured the pelvis ring are usually automatic caesarean candidates.

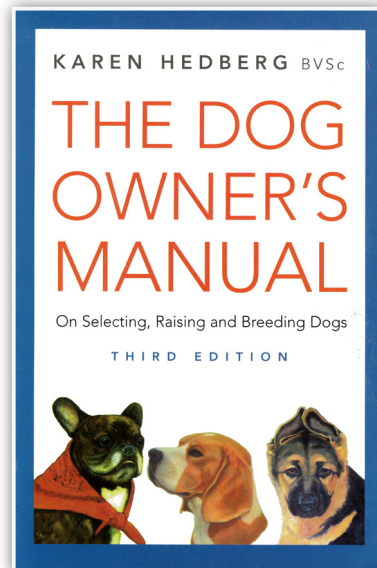


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Support of the bitch

Maiden bitches are often extremely dependent and will not let you out of their sight in the last day or two before whelping. If you go out or are asleep, they may wait with crossed legs until you appear, so they can deposit a puppy at your feet (with a great sigh of relief). Not all bitches are like this and the more independent bitches may insist on hiding under the house, shed or bed, strenuously resisting any attempts to bring them out into the open, where they imagine everyone will try to steal their puppies. Try to treat the bitch as normally as possible so she feels all is stable in her world.

To avoid all the variations, make sure the bitch has been well exposed to the proposed whelping area by sleeping or kennelling her in that area for at least a week prior to the due date.



If the bitch is desperate for your presence, sit in the box (large breeds, obviously), or beside the box, and gently give her little tummy rubs, but not too much or she will prefer this to actually whelping. If the bitch is coping very well, (the 'no fuss and bother' type), leave her more or less alone and sit in a chair on the other side of the room, getting up only to check if a puppy is still in the sack, or is particularly sluggish. Keep strangers out – viewing audiences are not required, nor desired by the bitch. Whelping is, after all, a very private affair.

Your presence and support during the whelping, while not necessarily interfering, can greatly reduce the stress of the

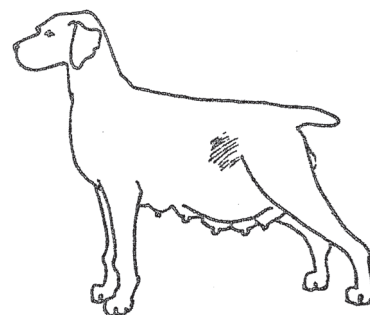
bitch. The number of puppies that survive can be increased by judicious assistance, preferably with an experienced person based on sound knowledge of what is occurring, how to cope with it and how to avoid panicking.

The bitch preparing for whelping

The bitch will usually whelp at 60-61 days (smaller breeds 62-63 days) after mating. Three to four days prior to whelping, the bulk of the puppies 'drop' down from the ribcage and then gradually shifts back. In the last 48 hours, the bulk is halfway between the end of the ribs and the front of the pelvis. See diagram to the right.

The bitch is near to whelping when you can feel a puppy close to the pelvis (within 5cm of the front of the pelvis). She will start to lose a clear or creamy, thick mucous discharge about 24-48 hours before whelping. This is the cervical plug and should not be discoloured (i.e., green).

The milk starts to come from the back teats about 5-6 days prior to whelping and gradually, more easily from the teats further forwards. When you gently squeeze the front teats and the milk comes out very easily, whelping is usually 12-24 hours away.





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The bitch is often very loose in her motions in the last 24 hours due to hormonal changes taking place at this time.

It is normal for the temperature of the bitch to drop in the last 24 hours prior to whelping, from a normal 38.0° – 38.5° to around 37° C. This drop can be of quite a short duration and may be missed. Temperature taking can be a reasonably sound indication of approaching parturition but should be taken in context with the other symptoms mentioned previously.

Progesterone levels can be checked if the dates of mating are unknown or if the bitch was mated over a wide space of time with no progesterone testing done at the time. Progesterone levels drop sharply prior to whelping. If under 2ng (6nmol), whelping will usually commence within 12-14 hours.



Dr Karen Hedberg BVSc



Above: "The milk starts to come from the back teats about 5-6 days"

emergency that might cost the lives of the puppies and seriously affect the health of the bitch. Though, I must say, preferably not in the middle of the night, unless the bitch is actually in labour.

If your bitch regularly has trouble either holding a pregnancy or has heavy, discoloured discharges, care must be taken to prevent this in subsequent pregnancies.

Assisting the bitch

Use of Calcium while whelping.

Calcium is essential for muscle contraction. The process of whelping is an extremely muscular activity and the lack of calcium availability can slow down or halt the progress of the whelping. By giving calcium during whelping, preferably a rapidly and well-absorbed form of calcium, the whelping is much faster and usually more trouble-free. Calcium given during whelping is particularly valuable in the prevention of uterine inertia.

I find the best product to use is the chelated calcium tablets, e.g., Value Plus Organic Calcium® tablets, as they are rapidly absorbed. For medium-sized breeds, I suggest one tablet per hour, and one tablet per half hour when tired. For smaller breeds, give a quarter tablet and for large breeds two tablets.

Calcium syrups (e.g., Calcium Sandoz®) can be used during whelping as the sugar in the calcium syrup will assist in keeping the bitch's muscle tone and energy levels up. However, repeated high doses of the syrup can result in vomiting and very liquid diarrhoea, due to excessive sugar intake.

Food

The bitch usually goes off her food the night prior to whelping, but not all bitches will do this and some will eat at any stage. Pregnant bitches, particularly if they are carrying a large litter, run out of blood sugar very quickly and can run the risk of pregnancy toxæmia. If they are not eating, Nutrigel® and honey are highly concentrated food supplements that are very good for keeping the bitch's blood sugar and energy levels up.

If the bitch is off her food for more than 24 hours, is depressed or has a discoloured discharge at any time during pregnancy, particularly in the last week, take the bitch to your vet.

If there is anything seriously wrong, the sooner the bitch has veterinary attention the better. If the owner is worried, I would rather see a bitch than wait several days and end up with an



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Calcium is particularly important in those breeds or individuals that are highly strung or prone to milk fever. Some individuals become very stressed during whelping and can become aggressive towards their puppies (most commonly seen in Bull Terriers). High doses of calcium during and after whelping will reduce the incidence and severity of this problem.

The average bitch will need little or no assistance during whelping but, in my opinion, someone should always be present to give the bitch moral support. Medium-sized breeds generally whelp very easily and assistance is needed only if the bag fails to break, or when you may need to shake the fluids out of the lungs of a tired puppy at the tail-end of whelping. Giant breeds are often very slow whelpers as they have a tendency to be slothful, especially in late pregnancy.

Good exercise all the way through pregnancy can be very beneficial. Giant breeds may occasionally require a caesarean if they become too exhausted to push out the last few puppies when there is a large litter of 10-14 puppies. Small breeds and those possessing large heads, e.g., Bulldogs, Pekingese and Chihuahuas, can have difficulties due to small pelvis size (internal). Overweight bitches, especially when they are carrying a large load, can also be very slow whelpers.

Older bitches are slower to whelp, have poorer muscle tone (happens to us all!) and are more likely to lose puppies during whelping. You should be aware of this and if the bitch is slowing down to the point that the puppies are extremely stressed and/or hard to revive, you may need to consider a caesarean midway through the whelping.

This extract from 'The Dog Owner's Manual' was reproduced with permission from the author, Dr Karen Hedberg BVSc

