



The Whelping Process

Whelping your first litter can be exciting and rewarding, but if you've never bred dogs before, or experienced your dog giving birth, it can also be difficult to know what to expect. There's lots to prepare for, such as getting the whelping box ready, knowing what you'll need once the puppies arrive and how to keep the puppies at the right temperature once they're born. Find out everything you need to know below in our guide to whelping.

What is whelping?

Whelping is the name that's given to the process of a dog giving birth. Most dogs can whelp on their own, but sometimes, like humans, some dogs may have complications that can be dangerous to the mother or her puppies.

When is my bitch's due date?

Knowing your dog's due date gives you a deadline of when to have everything ready and lets you know roughly when to start watching out for signs that she's in labour, bearing in mind that some bitches can whelp a few days after or even before their due date. Most dogs are usually pregnant for around 63 days (post ovulation). If you know your dog's ovulation date then you can work out when she's likely due to whelp. Again, this is where the importance of progesterone testing comes up.

How can I prepare for birth?

If you haven't done so already, make sure you let your vet know that your dog is pregnant. If your dog is not registered with a vet then do so straight away. Your vet will be able to give you advice throughout pregnancy and will be there if you have an emergency during whelping. Make sure you have their daytime and out-of-hours telephone number saved in your phone or written down somewhere that's easy to access.

Talk to your dog's breeder or your mentor and read up about what to expect from 'normal' labour. The more familiar you are with what normal labour should look like, the easier it will be to spot any possible problems before they become too serious.

What will I need to help my dog during whelping?

If your dog is due to whelp, try keeping everything you need in one bag, box or area, so that it's easy to find and quick to grab for when she goes into labour.

You will need:

- ✓ A whelping box
- ✓ An absorbent material for the whelping box, such as newspapers (but these may become saturated quickly and often stay wet and cold), puppy pads, incontinence pads or vetbeds
- ✓ Towels for drying and cleaning up the puppies
- ✓ Calcium supplement (A deficiency in calcium can lead to ineffective contractions, nervousness, exhaustion, or eclampsia (a life-threatening low blood calcium condition), making timely, fast-absorbing supplementation crucial once labor begins.) ****This is an emergency situation!! Please contact your veterinarian for guidance and attention!!**
- ✓ A suction bulb to remove fluid from the mouth and nostrils
- ✓ Sterilized scissors to cut the umbilical cord (should you need them)
- ✓ Dental floss to tie the umbilical cord after cutting
- ✓ A heat source for the pups, either beside, in or over the whelping box (i.e., heat lamp, heating pads or warm hot water bottles wrapped in towels) **** use all with caution! (see below)**
- ✓ A notepad to record time intervals between puppies and contractions
- ✓ Digital scales to weigh the puppies once they're born. It's useful to know how much they weigh initially so you can keep a track of their weight gain or any loss
- ✓ Clean bedding for when labour finishes

****Please note that whelping supplies will vary depending on past experience or mentoring from experienced breeders.**

What is a whelping box?

A whelping box is a box that's designed to keep puppies safe during birth and for several weeks afterwards as they grow and become more independent. You can buy a whelping box, or you can make one yourself, but its aim is to keep the puppies contained and protected from the cold.

A whelping box should:

- ❖ Be large enough for the bitch to move around freely and stretch out comfortably, with a little room to spare. Make sure it's not too big, otherwise, the puppies may move too far away from her and can become cold or may not feed enough.
- ❖ Have sides that allow the bitch to move in and out, but are high enough to keep newborn puppies safe and stop them from escaping.
- ❖ Be warm and comfortable, and have a waterproof base.
- ❖ Be lined with bedding that is absorbent, can be cleaned (i.e., vetbeds, towels or a whelping pad), and doesn't slip easily when moved.
- ❖ Be safe and secure. Some breeders use 'pig rails' along the sides (around 3 - 4 inches high) to stop any puppies from being crushed up against the walls.
- ❖ In your whelping box, don't use hay, wood shavings or straw, as these can damage the puppy's skin and eyes. Also, don't have lots of small blankets or pieces of cloth as the puppies may crawl underneath them and either be smothered by them or may be crushed by their mum – one large piece of vetbed is ideal.

Can I use a crate as a dog whelping box?

What you use as your whelping box is up to you, but it must be suitable for keeping your dog and her puppies safe. Some people prefer to buy a box specifically designed for whelping, while others may build a box or repurpose something that can be adapted to make it suitable. If using a crate, ensure that any bars or openings are not big enough or where the puppies could accidentally stick their head through and get stuck.

Do all dogs nest before whelping?

In the last week or so of pregnancy, most dogs will begin to show signs of nesting behaviours. This is a natural instinct that comes to most dogs to help them find a place that is safe and quiet to give birth and care for their puppies. Some may try and dig holes in the garden under bushes, so it's a good idea to introduce your dog to her whelping box and make sure that she's got used to it before she goes into whelp.

What is the best place for my dog to give birth?

When you're deciding where to put your dog's whelping box, make sure that you choose somewhere that your dog will feel comfortable. It should be a room that's warm, comfortable and not draughty. Also, try to choose a room where your dog can have a bit of peace and quiet and won't be constantly disturbed. A busy family sitting room may not be ideal for some dogs. Despite you choosing the ideal location, some dogs will have other ideas and may find somewhere else that they think is better.

When should I put my dog in a whelping box?

It's important to give your dog time to get used to her whelping box. Make sure that everything is set up, in position and ready for use around one week before she's due to whelp. This should give your dog plenty of time for her to explore it on her terms, get comfy and make it feel like her own safe space.

How can I keep my puppies warm?

When your puppies are born, it's important that, initially, the whelping box is kept at approximately 29°C to 32°C. When puppies are first born, it's important to keep them warm until they're able to regulate their own body temperature. Puppies may snuggle up to their mum to keep them warm, but it's a good idea to also have an extra heat source. You could use heat lamps, heating pads (electric or water-filled ones) or microwavable heat pads. Whatever you choose, make sure that the heat source:

- ❖ Is put somewhere that allows the puppies to move away if they get too hot
- ❖ Doesn't stop mum from getting up, moving around the whelping box or leaving the whelping box to get water
- ❖ Doesn't have wires or other parts that can be chewed by the puppies
- ❖ Is ideally in the centre of the box to encourage the puppies to move away from the edges of the box where their mum can lie down on them, and squash them against the sides
- ❖ Can be monitored with a thermometer, to check that it's not too hot or too cold

Should I leave my dog alone during labour?

It's a good idea for you to be with your dog while she delivers her puppies, especially if:

- You're new to breeding
- It's your dog's first time
- Your dog is slightly older
- She's had any complications during pregnancy

Being on standby allows you to jump into action if anything goes wrong. Some dogs may like their owners to be with them, while others may prefer a little more space. If your dog would rather be left alone, then try to be involved as little as possible, or stay at a distance to help her feel less stressed.

What to feed a whelping dog

It's normal for your dog to not want to eat before or during labour. Labour can be thirsty work, so they must stay hydrated, so make sure she has access to plenty of cool water, should they need it.

What are the first signs of whelping?

A bitch's temperature will often drop by about 1°C around one to two days before she goes into labour, and fluctuate up and down. To give you an early warning, you could take her temperature and keep a record of it two to three times a day from about a week before her due date. A temperature drop that holds for 24 hours is a sign of impending whelp. Other signs might include:

- ❖ Being restless
- ❖ Nesting, by gathering bedding, circling or digging at the floor
- ❖ Finding somewhere quiet to go and be by herself (hopefully the whelping box)
- ❖ Eating less
- ❖ Producing milk, although this can happen up to a week before she gives birth
- ❖ Licking her genitals
- ❖ Being sick and/or having diarrhea
- ❖ Panting and / or shivering
- ❖ She may pass a mucous plug from her vagina, which is usually white or clear, but may become red/brown closer to the arrival of the puppy
- ❖ As she gets closer to giving birth, she may settle down and begin to have contractions. These contractions will become stronger and closer together as labour continues. As you get even closer to birth, your dog's waters may break.
- ❖ If you have any doubts while your dog is in labour, then speak to your vet straight away. It's also useful to have an experienced breeder that you can contact if you have any non-urgent questions, or just for general guidance. For first-time breeders, having an experienced breeder with you to guide you is invaluable.

How long does dog whelping last?

This very much depends on the number of puppies expected. Whelping usually takes most dogs around 3 – 12 hours to birth their entire litter, but this may be different for some dogs and may vary between breeds. Dogs with slimmer heads tend to birth more quickly than dogs with bigger or wider heads. Some dogs may give birth to one or two puppies quite quickly and then rest for a while before labour starts again. Labour shouldn't take more than 24 hours. If you're concerned that your dog's labour is too long, or isn't progressing between puppies, then always speak to your vet urgently.

What happens during whelping – a step-by-step guide

Contractions - Your dog will begin to have strong contractions and she will pant, sometimes quite heavily. Her contractions should continue to get stronger until she begins to strain, ready to push out a puppy.

Discharge - During contractions, you may see some clear or bloody discharge around your dog's vagina. This is normal. If you notice a lot of blood, then contact your vet at once.

When to expect the first puppy – Her first puppy will usually take the longest to arrive. How quickly this takes depends on the number of puppies she has and the strength of her contractions. The first puppy may arrive between 30 minutes to four hours after contractions start.

What's the first thing you see? – As the puppy begins to come out, the first thing you usually see is the puppy in its amniotic sac. This is a fluid bag around the puppy. This may burst as the puppy is born and may be accompanied by the placenta.

Heads or tails? - When your puppies begin to arrive, they will usually come head first, but some come tail first. Both of these are normal.

Amniotic sac - Puppies are often born inside a thin membrane or sac. Your dog will lick and clean the puppies, remove the membrane and chew through the umbilical cord. She won't usually need any help, but some bitches may focus on the next puppy that's coming instead of caring for the one that's just been born. If you need to help, make sure that the sac is broken and that the puppy's mouth and nose are clear. Rub the puppy with a clean towel, or encourage mum to lick the puppy, to help them take their first breath.

Feeding – Soon after being born, and the mum has cleaned up the pup, it should begin to feed. If the puppy is finding it difficult to take milk or find their food, try rubbing their nose sideways on their mother's nipple.

Green discharge - A puppy's placenta is greenish-black in colour. Sometimes during labour, there may be a little bit of green discharge after a puppy has been born. But, if there's an excess of green or dark discharge from your dog's vagina, particularly if a puppy hasn't been born yet or it's been a while since a puppy was born, then it could mean there is a problem and you should contact or proceed to your vet.

Between puppies - Between puppies, your dog should seem comfortable and settled and care for her newborn pups until her contractions begin again.

When to expect the next puppy? - There is often a 15 - 30-minute gap between puppies. Contact your vet if:

She is not straining, but it's been longer than two hours

If she's straining for more than 20 to 30 minutes and there is no sign of a puppy

Birthing placentas - Each puppy develops in the womb with a placenta. This gives the puppy nutrients and oxygen while they're growing. Your dog will usually deliver the puppy and placenta separately. She may deliver a puppy and then its placenta, and then another puppy, followed by its placenta etc., or she may deliver several puppies followed by several placentas. Both of these are normal.

Counting puppies and placentas - Many breeders try to count the puppies and the placentas as they appear, this is sometimes not as easy as it sounds. Counting these helps you to know when she has finished giving birth and if she has any retained placentas. If your dog retains a placenta, it can cause an infection.

Eating placentas - Your dog may eat her puppy's placenta. This is normal but is not essential. Rather than playing a necessary nutritional role, it's likely an important part of keeping her nest tidy and clear. Eating too many placentas can cause her to be sick or have diarrhea, so try to restrict how many she eats. Some breeders try to take the placentas out of the whelping box as soon as they arrive

Helping out - Most dogs don't need help giving birth. Some breeders like to help clean up the puppies, ensure they are breathing and cut and tie off the umbilical cord, while others prefer to let their dog get on with it themselves. If possible, try to have an experienced breeder on standby to help answer any questions.

Should I count the afterbirths?

It's useful to count the number of placentas that your dog births, but this is sometimes easier said than done. Some dogs may try to eat the placenta as soon as it's produced, making it difficult to count, unless you're watching your dog constantly. If the placenta isn't passed straight away then it may break down and pass out when your dog goes to the toilet, around 24-48 hours later. Sometimes a retained placenta can cause an infection, so if you are concerned that your dog may have a retained placenta, or if you notice a bloody or unpleasant-smelling vaginal discharge in the next couple of days, speak to your vet.

How do you know if a puppy is stuck?

Although most puppies are born without any problems, some puppies may become stuck in the birthing canal. Signs that a puppy might be stuck, that will require help from your vet, include:

- ❖ She's straining for more than 30 minutes and there is no sign of a puppy
- ❖ You can see part of a puppy or an amniotic sac in the birth canal, but it doesn't move any further for 20-30 minutes
- ❖ If she seems to be in a lot of discomfort, especially if she is chewing or repeatedly licking at her vulva
- ❖ If you see the puppy's tail dangling out of your dog's vagina and there is no sign of the progression
- ❖ If your dog seems to be finding it difficult to pass her puppy and there is the is a lump behind her vulva

Can puppies be born 24 hours apart?

Puppies can very occasionally be born 24 hours apart, but this is not normal. If your dog has been in labour for 24 hours and has more puppies to come, or is still having contractions, then you should contact your vet for advice. Not only do the puppies need to come out, but your dog may also be exhausted, which can affect her ability to care for her puppies.

When to contact your vet

If your dog is due to whelp soon, let your vet know a couple of days in advance so that they know that you might need help, or to let you know if there might be any problems with you contacting them.

Although serious whelping complications are rare, it doesn't stop your first time from being stressful. It's always useful to have an experienced breeder on standby to help answer any questions, but it's also useful to have a list of when you should contact your vet.

We recommend you contact your vet if:

- ❖ It's been more than 24 hours since the first stages of whelping (restlessness, pacing panting) and there are no signs of contractions
- ❖ Her waters have broken two to three hours ago, but nothing has happened
- ❖ She's in between delivering puppies and she's not straining, and it's been longer than two hours
- ❖ Your dog is straining for more than 30 minutes and there is no sign of a puppy
- ❖ You can see part of a puppy or an amniotic sac in the birth canal, but it doesn't move any further for 20-30 minutes
- ❖ She has a dark or green discharge, especially if she hasn't had any puppies yet, or it's been a while since the last puppy was delivered
- ❖ She is bleeding a lot
- ❖ She has a foul-smelling discharge
- ❖ She is very tired or if she seems to be in a lot of discomfort, especially if she is chewing at, or repeatedly licking her vulva
- ❖ She is sick a lot or seems unwell
- ❖ She collapses
- ❖ She shows severe abdominal pain
- ❖ There is something wrong with the puppies, e.g., they're not feeding properly or constantly crying
- ❖ You're concerned that not all the placentas have been passed
- ❖ If you need to take your dog to the vet, bring along any puppies that have already been born. Take them in a separate box with something to keep them warm, such as a heat pad or a hot water bottle. If you do use a hot water bottle, make sure there is no way that the puppies can burn themselves on it and that it is wrapped in something to protect the puppies' skin.

How to know when your dog has finished whelping

Once she has finished whelping, your dog will probably begin to relax and give the puppies more attention. Labour usually takes 3 – 12 hours but can last longer. A pre-whelping x-ray is beneficial as you know the number of puppies expected. If you are expecting more puppies, but there has been no sign of them for two hours then contact your vet for advice.

What should I do after my dog gives birth?

After all of the puppies are born, your dog will need some time to care for her puppies, bond with them and she will need to rest too. Make sure that she is comfortable and that the room she is in is kept quiet and calm. Your dog may also be hungry and thirsty. When feeding your dog for the first time after labour, feed her in the room that she's whelped in. Some breeders prefer to put her food outside the whelping box, while others prefer to give it to her while she's in the whelping box, but they make sure that it's taken away and cleared up once she's finished.