

Pregnancy in Bitches

Pregnancy in bitches lasts for 63-65 days from fertilisation to whelping (giving birth). During pregnancy the bitch should gain weight, approx 35% of their body weight. Mammary development occurs in the second half of pregnancy. Abdominal swelling or expansion is usually obvious in the last twenty days. Foetus movement can sometimes be seen in the last week and secretions from the mammary gland may be seen when whelping is imminent.

What should I feed?

Pregnant bitches require a balanced nutritious and highly digestible diet throughout pregnancy.

Vitamin and mineral supplementation are not usually necessary if a good quality complete diet is used. Calcium supplements should be avoided until after whelping.

How much should I feed?

It is important not to overfeed as obesity will cause problems during whelping. Food quantity should be increased gradually from week 5 of pregnancy and by the time of whelping she should be receiving 30% more food than her normal amount.

During lactation her energy requirements will increase dramatically and she will need 3 times the amount of food she normally has (when not pregnant). Meals should be given little and often at this stage and you may choose to feed a high calorie complete diet formulated especially for lactating bitches.

What about exercise?

Exercise should still be given to maintain her fitness but strenuous (exhausting) exercise should be avoided.

What else will she need?

Worming of the bitch should be done from mid-pregnancy until whelping as worms can infect foetuses across the placenta.

A quiet area for whelping should be provided at least 1 week before her due date.

If your dog is on any medication at the time of pregnancy – seek advice from your vet. Some medications can cause problems during pregnancy such as abortion or tooth and bone discoloration.

Initiation of whelping in the bitch

Parturition (whelping) is stimulated by hormones, in particular cortisol which is released by the maturing foetus. The levels of progesterone which sustains pregnancy start to decrease (progesterone inhibits uterine contractions). Oestrogen levels starts to rise, which helps to coordinate contractions of the uterine wall.

The placenta produces prostaglandin which causes the corpus luteum to regress and stimulates the release of relaxin. Relaxin causes the pelvic ligaments to relax and dilates the cervix. This combination of hormones initiates the contractions and stretching of the cervical area stimulates the release of oxytocin from the pituitary gland which further promotes the contractions.

Signs of imminent parturition

- Drop in body temp to 37-38°C
- Bitch seeks dark quiet area for nesting
- She refuses food
- Milk is produced in the mammary glands
- The vulva may appear slightly swollen
- There may be some vaginal discharge

Stage 1 of whelping (approx 4 hrs, can be 24-36hrs if it's her first litter)

Uterine contractions
The cervix relaxes & dilates
The foetus moves into pelvic canal
The head engages in cervix

Stage 2 - Expulsion of foetus by contractions

Involuntary contractions of the muscular uterine wall are accompanied by voluntary contractions of the abdominal wall (pushing!)
Time varies but the 'normal' time taken to expel a puppy would be no more than 30 mins - breaks between puppies can be up to 4 hours.
Expulsion of each foetus will be followed by expulsion of each placenta
Mothers will often eat the placenta

When should I seek help from the vet?

Call the vet if more than 6 hours elapses between puppies, if the bitch strains for more than 30 minutes unproductively or if you are worried about any abnormal signs she is exhibiting.