



Whelping Puppies

By – Bob Franklin

The big day is almost here. Your bitch has been bred to a great sire and you have nurtured her through almost 9 weeks of pregnancy. She will deliver her puppies anywhere between 59 and 70 days from that first breeding, but the most common average is 63 days. Hopefully, the previous two articles about breeding and canine pregnancy have helped get your bitch successfully to where she is now – about to deliver a litter of puppies.

You had her X-rayed a few days ago and the best you and your vet can determine is that she has 4 puppies in the "hopper." There might be one more but you cannot be certain. Your bitch has been nesting all day, her temperature has gradually dropped over the past 24 hours to 98.4 degrees Fahrenheit and she seems to have to pee every ten minutes. She is apparently getting close. You have a location all picked out for her to be when delivering her puppies. You have a supply of rags or old towels and perhaps an old blanket or quilt in the whelping area. Other useful items to have on hand are a small aspirator, a thermometer, a jar of Vaseline to lubricate the thermometer, two sterile gloves, dental floss (in case an umbilical cord needs to be tied to stop bleeding), a small pair of scissors, a heating pad and a bottle of alcohol (for sterilization not consumption!) That kind of alcohol can come later when the whelping is completed. All of your reference books are nearby and you just called your vet to inform him/her that your bitch is getting close. Since you know it may take a while, you have something to sit on or you may even have a sleeping bag and pillow on the floor beside the whelping area plus a good book or magazine to read.

This article does not intend to go into the very technical, medical aspects of what triggers parturition (giving birth) but rather will try to help breeders with the practical side of understanding and assisting the bitch to deliver live, healthy puppies. The first stage of labor is when the cervix dilates, but only trained personnel can really determine if this has happened. The progesterone levels will drop abruptly causing the bitch's temperature to drop, but again only a vet or trained technician can determine the progesterone change. However, most deliveries can be expected to start within 24 hours, or at the most 30 hours, after the temperature drops. But since most breeders only check the bitch's temperature every 12 hours, the lapsed time could vary since exact timing of temperature drop will not be known. In fact, for an occasional bitch, the temperature will not drop much at all. Most bitches will usually refuse a meal during this time but will otherwise act normally. Nesting may take place with the bitch shredding papers or bedding and rearranging it by pushing it around with their noses. It is during this time that the cervix starts dilating.

The next aspect of first-stage labor usually involves steadily increasing discomfort. The bitch will rest at intervals, pant, move around, change positions, pant some more, perhaps lie on her back and generally appear uneasy. This stage may last several hours. Or, it is possible that the bitch may not exhibit any of these signs of coming delivery. But, it ALWAYS seems like delivery occurs during the wee hours of the night or even all night and part of the next day so be prepared to be working with the bitch for a long time.

If you watch her closely, at some point you may be able to detect the first labor contractions signaling the onset of the next stage of parturition (giving birth). She will display an abdominal press or tightening of her stomach muscles, her tail may appear to quiver or shake momentarily or she may make a small sound. She may rush to the door and ask to go out presumably to have a bowel movement or pee. It appears that the sensation of a puppy entering the birth canal is much like that of a bowel movement or at least some bitches seem to interpret it that way. It is strongly recommended that a leash be attached when she goes out to avoid her disappearing under the deck or porch looking for a better location in which to whelp her puppies. She usually squats as if to eliminate, but after the first trip out, she probably won't pass much. Some bitches may even vomit their last meal or if it has been awhile since she ate, just a small amount of stomach fluid will come up.

Labor contractions at first usually come at intervals of around ten minutes. They usually come in waves of three to five contractions followed by a period of rest. She may assume all sorts of positions (sitting, squatting, lying on her side, standing or even arching her back) trying to relieve the pain. Some will make noises and others will be very stoic and quiet about the whole ordeal. All of this is serving to move the first puppy into the birth canal and its presence puts pressure on the dorsal wall of the vagina, further stimulating harder contractions. Since there are two horns to the uterus each containing puppies, it is conceivable that two puppies will try to emerge at once, but hopefully they will "take turns". As a puppy moves down the canal, contractions will become stronger and more frequent. A discharge of mucus, presumably the cervical mucous plug, will be passed but is rarely noticed since the bitch frequently licks her vulva area.

If the bitch undergoes contractions for more than two hours with no results, better call your vet. for advice. Possibly her contractions are not strong enough to accomplish delivery or there may be any number of other problems that will require veterinary assistance. Some of the more frequent problems will be discussed later, but entire books have been written on this subject. So, the reader is best advised to purchase any one of several excellent books on Canine Reproduction or rely on their veterinarian for help.

As the first puppy reaches the vulva, its outer fluid-filled sac, the amniotic sac, pushes through the vulva and will look like a dark colored bubble which eventually will rupture - usually with no sign of a puppy. The area just above the bitch's vulva will bulge as birthing gets closer because of the presence of the puppy in the canal as contractions force the puppy over the rim of the pelvis. Rupture of the amniotic sac is not a problem unless it ruptures very early and the delivery is delayed long enough for the vaginal lining to become dry since these fluids are important for lubrication.

Usually during this time, the bitch is vigorously licking her vulva and often will move around the birthing area. If there are sides on the whelping area, she may even cram her rear up against the sides and she should be gently moved so the puppy can even come out. Eventually the bitch's contractions will push the puppy out her vulva appearing as another bubble at first and after several more strong contractions, the puppy may actually "squirt" out. About 60% of the time, the puppy will be delivered anterior presentation (head first) and once the head is clear, the puppy usually seems to slide out quickly.

Sometimes - especially with posterior presentation (hind end first which occurs approximately 40% of the time) - a small portion of the puppy will appear to move in and out with each contraction and emerges no further after several more contractions. Presumably in this case, the head may be sort of "hung up" on the bitch's pelvis and the contractions are having trouble pushing the puppy over this hump or her contractions just may not be strong enough to push the puppy entirely out. Using a soft cloth, perhaps a handkerchief or cheese cloth since the amniotic fluids make the sack containing the puppy very slippery, gently grasp the puppy (usually the feet or head as that is probably all you can reach) and GENTLY tug during each contraction to help the bitch extract the puppy.

The bitch will normally begin licking up the amniotic fluid, lick herself, and lick the puppy in almost a random manner. Her licking serves to break the allantoic membrane which covers the pup if it has not already ruptured during the delivery. Licking also stimulates the puppy and helps remove fluid from around its head facilitating its breathing. The breeder may want to help this allantoic membrane rupture and make certain the puppy's head is not still enclosed. Sometimes it is wise to gently insert one finger into the puppy's mouth as well as roll the puppy around a bit to help stimulate breathing.

If the placenta is delivered with the puppy, the bitch will usually grab and swallow it immediately. At virtually the same time, she will begin to chew the umbilical cord since the placenta is attached to the umbilical cord as well. The bitch may be a bit rough and actually lift the puppy off the ground while working on the umbilical cord but this usually will not cause an umbilical hernia and actually appears to stimulate the puppy's breathing via nervous system feedback. But sometimes it is wise to hold the umbilical cord close to the puppy to keep the bitch from tugging too hard as she chews the cord or to make sure she doesn't accidentally chew one of the puppy's legs instead. Do let her chew the umbilical cord with her cheek teeth because this seems to crush or pinch-off blood vessels in the cord and reduce danger of bleeding.

If after a moment or two, the puppy is not breathing or moving then you should help by holding the puppy by its tail while it is lying on a soft surface and rubbing it vigorously with a towel until it begins to respond. Check the puppy's mouth to see if there is fluid or perhaps its tongue is rolled back into the throat.

If the puppy is making gurgling noises as it tries to breath, use the small aspirator, sterile cloth or cotton swab to remove as much fluid as you can. If an aspirator is used, be gentle to avoid causing too much suction that could damage internal organs. You may have to perform what is called "shaking a puppy down" to remove fluids from the lungs. Wrap the puppy in a small towel and hold it with its spine down along your fingers and with its head away from you being careful to fully support the puppy's head with your fingers. Stand slightly straddle-legged and think of the puppy as a delicate but large mercury thermometer that you must shake down. Rapidly move the puppy down from about shoulder height to almost between your legs stopping abruptly at the bottom. Sometimes fluid can even be seen flying out of the puppy's nose. Repeat several times and then put the puppy up near your ear and listen to see if the gurgling has stopped. Most puppies likely will let you know when they have had enough as the gurgling will change into a lusty cry. Observe this puppy frequently to be certain the gurgling doesn't reoccur.

Sometimes puppies that have been too long in the birth canal will appear to be still-born. However, many can be resuscitated if worked with. Rub such a puppy briskly with a towel for a few seconds as was described earlier to see if there is any response. Listen to see if there is any gurgling sound and "shake the puppy down" a few times. Using your fingers gently squeeze the puppy's chest a few times in hopes of stimulating the puppy's heart. Quickly follow the squeezing of the puppy's chest by covering the puppy's muzzle and mouth with your own mouth and blow gently, forcing air into the puppy's lungs but not so hard as to damage the newborn's delicate lung tissues. Use your cheeks to do this blowing as this air will be more oxygen rich than would air expelled from your own lungs. Repeat this procedure a few times and in between sessions again rub the puppy vigorously with a towel.

Check the puppy's color after four or five minutes of the above efforts to revive it to see if the puppy's nose, legs, paw pads and gums are white, pink or blue. If they are white or almost white, you may have lost the puppy, but if they are pink or even bluish colored, there is usually life still there and you should continue working with that puppy. Occasionally a puppy will even respond after an hour of such work so don't give up too quickly. This is good reason to have more than one person available during whelping so the bitch doesn't go completely unattended while efforts are underway to revive a puppy.

Some breeders have a small oxygen tank available and put gasping puppies in a little tent made with a plastic bag or Saran wrap over a box to provide oxygen enriched air for the struggling puppy to breath.

It is very important to keep new-born puppies WARM. If a puppy is not kept warm enough, its entire system, including digestion, could shut down and that puppy could die or develop future complications, ie., pneumonia. Puppies should be kept at about 85 degrees Fahrenheit for the first 10 days of life. BUT, avoid over heating puppies as this could cause severe dehydration if they are panting all the time. Keep the heat source general for the entire area or keep a heating pad entirely underneath the whelping box.

The interval between puppies varies from a few minutes to several hours with the average delay being 30 minutes to one hour. The bitch will alternately rest and lick to clean her puppy. Sometimes it seems she is intent on licking all the hair off of the puppy and is so happy with that one puppy that she seems to forget all about delivering any others. Try to get the one puppy already delivered to nurse as this tends to stimulate further contractions from the bitch thus speeding up the entire birthing procedure. Usually puppies have strong instincts as to where to go and how to suckle. Others may be a bit slower and may require assistance or the bitch's licking of her puppies may be so intense that she actually prevents the puppies from nursing.

Usually the puppies are delivered randomly from the two uterine horns. If more than two hours elapse between deliveries, you should contact your vet for advice and/or suggestions. The vet may suggest something as simple as taking the bitch for a walk on a leash to see if that stimulates more contractions from the bitch. Or, perhaps a trip to the vet office will be recommended. The vet may do any one of many things ranging from an injection of pituitary oxytocin hormone to stimulate contractions or manipulation of the pup(s) in the uterine track to see if perhaps two are stuck trying to enter the birth canal at the same time. In extreme cases, the vet may be forced to perform a Cesarean Section.

Make a whelping record recording the bitch's temperature chart, her actions pre-labor and what she does during labor. Then record the time of each birth, the sex of each puppy and anything pertinent about that delivery as well as any identification markings that can help later to identify each puppy. Especially important is to weigh each puppy with an accurate cooking type scale (accurate to the ¼ oz) because that will become an important benchmark for monitoring growth of the puppies over the next few days.

Excellent References: "Dog Breeding for Professionals", by Dr. Herbert Richards, published by T.F.H. Publications, Inc. and "The Mating and Whelping of Dogs" by R. Portman -Graham L.D.S., R.C.S. (Eng), published by Popular Dogs in London.