



# Parturition or Whelping in the Bitch

Parturition (or whelping) is the act of giving birth. The gestation period (pregnancy) in the bitch lasts between 63 and 65 days. As an owner, you need to be aware of all the different stages of parturition and understand signs of difficulty or normality to guide you and your bitch through the process.

Subtle signs that parturition is soon to occur can sometimes be seen a few days beforehand:

- Swelling and softening of vulval lips
- A slight discharge may be seen as the cervix begins to dilate
- Temperature may drop 6-18 hours before parturition (normal 38°C)
- Appetite may be reduced
- Bedding such as newspapers may be torn up to build a nest.

Behaviour can vary between each individual bitch and in some cases no signs will be seen at all.

## The initial stages of parturition

Mild uterine contractions begin to sweep over the uterus with gradual dilation of the cervix; this can last up to 48 hours.

The bitch can show signs of mild physical discomfort including restlessness, agitation, panting and licking the vulval area. Strings of mucus may hang from the vulva, milk can be present in the mammary glands, and the first water bag may rupture. The foetus will be pushed towards the cervix as it starts to dilate.

## Second Stage

The contractions now become stronger and more frequent. The foetuses will be pushed into the vaginal birth canal. You will be able to see abdominal contractions for the first time as this will now enable the bitch to deliver the foetuses from the birth canal through the vulva.

In some cases a dark green discharge can be present; this is normal and indicates that the placenta has separated from the womb.

**The time between the signs of straining and birth varies between 30 to 60 minutes. If this time is longer it can indicate a problem, referred to as dystocia, and veterinary attention is essential for the wellbeing of the bitch and her puppies.**

The normal position for delivery is with the long axis of the puppy with the long axis of the bitch. In essence the puppies need to have either their hind limbs or forelimbs facing out in front of their back end or head, allowing a smooth delivery. After the birth of the puppy the bitch should lick the puppy clean and stimulate them to breathe. If she does not appear to be doing this you must ensure that you remove the amniotic sac from their face, clearing the airways and allowing them to breathe. The bitch should break the umbilical cord to separate the puppy from the placenta. A healthy puppy should then make its own way around to the teats and begin to suckle.

### Third Stage

The delivery of the placenta should be seen within 30 minutes of a puppy being born. Remember each puppy will have a separate placenta so you should see the same number of placentas as puppies. Sometimes the placentas are passed **after** the puppies, so do not worry if the two do not appear together.

The bitch can rest up to two hours between deliveries of consecutive puppies. Once you believe that your bitch has finished delivering her litter a discharge can continue for up to 72 hours. However, if the discharge becomes a persistent green colour or foul-smelling you need to seek veterinary advice as the bitch may have a retained placenta.

### Care of the Newborn

Once the puppies are born it is vital that you check them for cleft palate, umbilical hernia or absence of an anus. If you notice any of these defects you need to contact your veterinary practice straight away.

It is very important that the whelping quarters are at a constantly warm temperature around 20-24°C for the first few days as puppies cannot regulate their body temperature. At 10 days old the puppies' sensory systems are developing and can cope with varying temperatures, however it cannot drop below 15.5°C.

If there are no obvious problems it is essential that interference needs to be kept to a minimum, however keep a close eye on the family to watch for any problems developing. Up to approximately three weeks the bitch should be able to provide milk to the litter, as long as she is settled and secure.

### Feeding regimes for the pregnant or lactating bitch

During pregnancy and lactation it is a very demanding time for the mum. The intake of energy and nutrients must be adequate not only to meet her requirements, but also to support the growth and development of the puppies.

At peak lactation, the energy and nutrient requirement can rise by three to four times the normal level for maintenance. Offering highly concentrated diets, such as puppy food, in small frequent meals can be beneficial and provide sustainability for her and her puppies needs. Remember that milk production is affected by protein quantity and it is important that a good quality diet is available. Supplementation with vitamins and minerals is not usually required and could actually cause a harmful imbalance in the diet.

Please do not hesitate to ask us for advice on feeding, or any of the other subjects covered in this leaflet.

