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How to Assist Pregnant Dogs Before and After Whelping

The vast majority of dogs and cats that give birth to normal, healthy puppies and kittens can do so without any assistance. Rarely, one may have trouble that will require a veterinarian's intervention. However, certain breeds (ex: English/French Bulldogs) require necessarily a c-section because due to the high risk of complications if they whelp naturally. The goal is to provide help to the mother when necessary, but to avoid getting in the way, adding discomfort, or harming the newborns.

Once the puppies and kittens are born, it is important to monitor their health. The top priority is to ensure that each newborn is receiving adequate nutrition, and care from the mother. If the mother pushes the young away or prevents one of them from receiving milk, then your intervention may be warranted.

Whelping refers to a female dog giving birth; queening refers to a female cat giving birth.

Step 1: Prepare!

You will need equipment/materials for birthing and aftercare.

- Dry towels
- Milk replacer
- Bottle
- Gloves
- Source of warmth for newborns
- Whelping box!
 - o A square, low walled pen that the mother and pups can be in together. A box (3x3 feet in length and width) that is open on one side to where the mother can walk in and out easily but contain the puppies in that one area.

*These are recommendations; birthing may easily take place without any of these items.

Even though we think intervening in the whelping process is helping the mother and pups, it can be a serious mistake when it's not necessary. The best thing to do is to observe/monitor for real problems, if any concerns at all please contact us or your nearest 24 hour emergency animal hospital.

Mothers most likely will nest prior to giving birth, using available paper, clothing, or other materials; this is normal. We recommend to use newspapers for the nest, it's easier to clean/change it when dirty.

It is normal for the mother to be protective of her newborns, USE CAUTION. If you have any other animals at home please keep separated from mother and newborns. She can be aggressive, if that happens approach with caution; do not put yourself or family members in harm's way.

Step 2: The Procedure!

There will be certain clues/signs that birth is imminent in pregnant dogs or cats:

- Body temperature does decrease as a sign (normal temperature is around 100.0 degrees). This is very important. Take temperature 2-3 times a day with multiple thermometers days before the suspected whelping date. Once temperature drops below 98.9 degrees, is when she will be giving birth in 24-48 hours
- The number of days since mating is "not" reliable for predicting the date of birth, as this can vary widely (58-72 days in dogs; 56-69 days in cats)

The first visible sign that she is starting the birthing process is abdominal contractions (straining). When contractions begin, one newborn should be born every 60 minutes or less until all are born. Dogs and cats can have very large litters or only 1-2 pups.

- Please note that 30 minutes of ACTIVE straining without producing a pup or kitten should prompt an immediate visit to your veterinarian, because birth canal may be blocked.
- The mother may rest between pups/kittens for up to 3-4 hours WITHOUT straining, before resuming labor.
 - A delay between pups/kittens of more than 4 hours without contractions and in an undisturbed environment is abnormal and you should contact your veterinarian

There will be a passage of the placenta (afterbirth) for each pup/kitten which occurs within 15 minutes or less of each individual birth in most cases. The mother will usually remove the placenta and cut it with her teeth. If she doesn't, and the pup/kitten is still within a membrane-like sac, you will need to take a lukewarm damp washcloth and wipe the placenta off and clean the newborns body surface.

If the mother neglects to cut the umbilical cord, this can be done for her. The umbilical cord must be tied (with thread or dental floss) about 1 inch from the newborn and cut away from the tie. This prevents the pup from bleeding out through the umbilical cord. (DO NOT PULL UMBILICAL CORD)

To remove excess liquid debris from the mouth and nose, you can use an infant nasal cleaner to suck out the liquid. This is a gentle suction process, so be sure not to push air into the lungs.

Encourage the mother to clean/care for the newborn by placing it on the ground close to her head so she can smell and lick it.

Place the puppy/kitten next to the mother's nipples, and encourage suckling. Most newborns will begin nursing within minutes of birth.

After birth you will need to make sure the mother is eating well and behaving normally. If the mother seems poorly responsive, has difficulty breathing, or otherwise shows signs that concern you, you should call your veterinarian.

Ensure that all newborns eat vigorously and are gaining weight on a daily basis. If newborns are pushed away by the mother or the litter is too large, owners may need to supplement feeding with a bottle or milk replacer. If newborns are crying all the time, then they are either hungry or may have serious medical problems.

Ensure that newborns stay warm. Do not use a heating pad in the crate or box in which the newborns are housed. Puppies and kittens tend to squirm under blankets and may come in direct contact with the heat source, causing burns or fatal overheating. Instead place heating blanket UNDER part of the box or crate and place several towels in the crate providing a nice living area for the newborns. If the mother is providing good care, a heating source may not be needed.

If the mother is not producing milk, or not allowing the newborns to nurse, bottle feeding may be necessary. Puppy and kitten milk replacers, along with bottles, are available at pet stores.

Puppies and kittens should nurse (or be fed if mother is not around) every 2 hours during the first 2 weeks of life, then every 4 hours during the third/forth week. Solid puppy/kitten food can be introduced at 4 weeks, with bottle feeding still being the main source of food.

Once the puppies have been fed the genitalia must be stimulated. Allowing the newborns to urinate and have a bowel movement. Take a warm washcloth and gently stroke the pup or kitten's groin area between the back legs until the newborn passes urine and a bowl movement (usually takes 10-60 seconds). This is done every time the puppy/kitten eat, and elimination should occur most, but not necessarily.

Do not force a newborn to suckle; forcing fluid into the mouth may cause fluid to enter the lungs that has been fatal. If newborn does not suckle, call your veterinarian for advice.

Final Step

It's always best for newborns to drink their mother's milk, as it provides the best nutrition and protection. One good practice for keeping track of nutritional balance is to weigh newborns on a daily basis, ensuring weight gain.

If you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to give us a call at 954-964-5557 or qualitycareah@yahoo.com

From your family veterinarian,

Quality Care Animal Hospital