



# Preparing the Whelping Area

The due date for your litter is fast approaching, so you want to make sure that you are set up and ready to go. You also want to make sure that your bitch is settled and comfortable in the whelping area before it comes time to have her babies.

## Choosing a suitable whelping area

The ideal whelping area is somewhere quiet, draft free, and well lit. Your bitch will need to feel safe and secure, so you will need to choose somewhere well away from other dogs and busy household 'traffic'.

For many breeders, the whelping area will be set up inside the house where supervision during those first few days or weeks is easy. Depending on your home's layout, possible options may include the laundry or a spare bathroom as these are generally areas that are easier to keep clean.

Other breeders may choose to set up their whelping area in their garage. It really does not matter as long as it is easy to access, easy to clean, has adequate ventilation, and is separate from other dogs.

You will need to set up your whelping area well ahead of time so that your bitch has a week or so to get used to her new sleeping quarters, and you have time to ensure everything is ready and working.

Make sure that the area you choose allows for easy supervision of the bitch and pups. You will probably spend many hours supervising the birth, checking on pups, assisting with feeding, and handling the puppies – so you want to be comfortable and have room to sit and watch, get in and clean, and maybe even sleep nearby for those first few nights.

If left to their own devices, bitches will choose their own whelping area - somewhere dark and quiet. Often this will be behind a shed, under a bed, in the bottom of a cupboard or under the house – so make sure that you help her transition to her whelping area well ahead of time.

You may have to restrict her access to certain areas (if needed) during those last few weeks to prevent her getting into a place where you will struggle to get her out should she decide to whelp early.

You also want to make sure that your whelping area is secure, so she cannot move her pups after they are born. A secure whelping area also prevents other dogs or unsupervised children from gaining access to the pups or stressing the mother.

## The whelping box

During the birth and for the first few weeks, your bitch will spend most of her day in with her pups – cleaning them, feeding them, and sleeping.

Puppies cannot regulate their own body temperature at this age, so they need to be protected from the cold. The idea of a 'whelping box' is to provide an area that helps to contain the pups, preventing them from straying too far from their littermates and their mother.

The whelping box needs to be large enough for the mother to lie down, turn around, and stretch out comfortably so she can feed her pups. It needs walls high enough to prevent puppies escaping, but low enough that the mother can get in and out easily.





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The whelping box needs to keep the mother and pups up off the cold ground, but not so high that there is a risk of puppies falling out and getting hurt. Outside of the whelping box, there needs to be a secure area where the bitch can rest comfortably away from the pups and where her food and water bowls can be safely placed.

There are a variety of commercially available whelping boxes available – made from fibreglass, laminate or other easily cleaned materials. Many have ‘roll bars’ (sometimes called ‘crush rails’ or ‘pig rails’) mounted on the walls to prevent the bitch from accidentally crushing a pup as she lies down. Some have inbuilt heating functions you can use to keep the puppies warm.

Of course any easily cleaned, appropriately sized and shaped ‘box’ (it does not have to be square) will work. It must be made of a material that can be disinfected easily, and the walls must be solid – so soft pet beds or cardboard boxes are not suitable.

## **Remember:**

*If you are new to breeding dogs, ask to see what other breeders use. You may even be able to borrow a whelping box from another breeder or your mentor(s).*

*Your whelping box needs to accommodate the mother and the growing pups through to around four weeks of age, so you need to factor in the size of your breed, and the likely litter size when choosing one.*

## **Temperature**

Your whelping area will need to be able to be maintained within 10 to 32 degrees Celsius at all times, and it needs to have adequate ventilation. Consider the time of year that you will be whelping your litter and think about how you will deal with any extremes of weather that may occur.

Regardless of the time of year, you will need a heat source for your puppies – this may be a heat lamp, an electric heat pad, hot water bottles or heated whelping box.

For the first three weeks of life, puppies cannot regulate their own temperature, so they are particularly susceptible to the cold. In the first few days of life, puppies require a higher temperature (up around 32 degrees Celsius), but this gradually decreases to around 25 degrees by the fourth week.

Often the temperature that best suits the pups will be too hot for the mother, and if she is hot, she will be restless. Restless mothers are at a higher risk of stepping on or lying on their pups because they move around more, get up and down trying to get comfortable or keep getting in and out of the whelping box.

Often the best solution is to provide a variable temperature gradient across the whelping box. This can be easily achieved by placing a heat lamp at a safe height over one corner of the whelping box. This gives both the mother and pups the option of moving towards or away from the heat as required. It is not uncommon to find the pups piled up in a group sleeping happily under the lamp, with mum asleep in the cooler area of the whelping box.

If you decide to use heating pads or hot water bottles, you will need to check them regularly – both to ensure they are at the right temperature, and to make sure they are still covered properly as there is the risk of burns if skin comes into direct contact with the hot surface.

## **Ventilation**

Your whelping area needs to have adequate ventilation – allowing good airflow to prevent odours. This has to be at a level that provides fresh air, without causing drafts that may chill the pups.

Have a look at your whelping area. Are there windows you can open to allow air movement? An exhaust fan that can be used to remove smells? Or do you need to address any possible sources of cold drafts? Think ahead about how you will provide proper ventilation to your whelping area.



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## Bedding

Your whelping box needs to contain soft absorbent bedding that can be easily disposed of or cleaned and disinfected.

You can expect a lot of mess during the birth, so most breeders choose to replace the bedding with newspaper as the litter is whelped. The bitch can dig it up, tear it up and once soiled it can be removed and disposed of easily. Now might be a good time to start stocking up on newspapers in preparation for the whelping!

You are going to need to clean the whelping box and bedding several times a day – especially if you have a larger litter, or if your bitch is not keen to eat the puppy's droppings.

Many breeders use a base of newspaper covered with a layer of 'dry bed' (a soft, easily cleaned bedding used in veterinary hospitals) for the whelping box. The newspaper can be replaced at each clean, and the dry bed pieces can be rotated – allowing the used ones to be washed and dried and a clean piece to be placed in the box.

*Speak to other breeders or your mentor(s) and ask what they use and why. They should also be able to help you source appropriate bedding.*

*Remember you need to have enough bedding to be able to cope with 2 to 3 bedding changes each day.*

Whatever bedding you choose, it should be soft and comfortable for the bitch to lie on, and easy to wash and dry. Although deep, thick bedding may seem even more comfortable, you need to be careful that puppies do not become trapped or squashed if they get themselves under layers of bedding.

Finally, you need to ensure that the bedding provides some traction for the puppies to move about on. Slippery surfaces or surfaces where toenails can get caught will prevent puppies from being able to get to the teats to feed or to move to the warmth when they are cold.

## Lighting

Your whelping area needs to have good lighting so that you can see what is happening. There needs to be plenty of daylight during the day, and at night, you need the ability to light the area well.

Remember: most bitches tend to whelp at night, and you will need to be able to clearly see what is going on even if it is 1 am or 2 am in the morning!

## Introducing your bitch to the whelping area

As she nears the end of her pregnancy, you will want to start getting your bitch used to the whelping area so that by the time she is due to whelp, she is relaxed and settled in there.

Moving to the whelping area can be a significant change in routine for any dog, especially one that is used to being a house pet and being involved in all the goings on of a busy household.

To start with, a good idea is to begin feeding her in the whelping area. This not only pairs the whelping area with a positive experience but also allows you to separate her from any other pets whilst she eats. She will be having more frequent, small, meals towards the end of her pregnancy, so there are a number of opportunities to do this each day.

With each meal, you can gradually increase the amount of time that she remains confined to the whelping area afterwards – starting with just a few minutes and increasing it over time to 15 or 30 minutes. Make sure there is some comfortable bedding in the whelping box, a bowl of fresh, clean water, and that the area is at a comfortable temperature.

At night, she should be introduced to sleeping in the whelping area. Although most bitches will happily sleep in the whelping box provided it has soft and warm bedding, you may find that moving her regular bed into the area outside the whelping box helps make things a little more familiar, and gives her another option.



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This transition time is an opportunity to make sure that the whelping area is secure and safe, and that everything is working. Although your other pets may be interested in what is going on, they should not be able to get into the whelping area, and your bitch should not be able to escape it.

The area also needs to be child safe, and any children in the household will need to be coached in how they will have to behave both before and after the puppies arrive.

Young children can be fabulous with puppies, but you don't want any unsupervised interactions. New mothers can be very protective of their babies, regardless of how wonderful their temperament is normally!

As she transitions into spending more time in the whelping area, you may need to get your bitch used to changes in toileting routine, especially if she usually has free access outside or uses a doggy door.

Depending on the location of your whelping area, you may find that going back to being on lead and escorted directly from the whelping area to the toileting area outside helps prevent mistakes.

This is a perfect time to introduce the routine that you will follow once the pups arrive. Exercise, enrichment, grooming and time for social interaction are still important for your female, but they take place away from the whelping area.

You may have to modify the amount and type of activities, and take things a little slower. The routine for everyone else in the household will also change – including family members and other pets – so now is the time for everyone to get used to the new normal.

## Thinking ahead – as your litter grows

Although the whelping area is your focus in the weeks leading up to the birth, you will also need to consider where the litter will be housed once they outgrow the whelping box.

Generally, puppies will start moving around and exploring from about 3 to 4 weeks of age. There will come a time where they will begin to escape from the whelping box. This is when the litter will need to start transitioning to a larger pen with some outdoor access.

You will need to plan ahead so that when the time comes, you have already prepared the area the litter will move to.

This area will need to be secure so that puppies cannot escape and other animals cannot get in. It will need to have sleeping quarters that are warm, dry and out of the weather, as well as room to exercise and explore.

Ideally, it will have a separate toileting area with an appropriate substrate such as grass, and plenty of room for puppies to play.

