



Caring for your Litter - First Few Days

Your litter is finally here! All that planning, waiting, and anticipation is over. Now you start the next exciting phase of breeding – making sure that your pups have every opportunity to grow and thrive.

The first few days can be critical, so you want to make sure both the pups and their mother have everything that they need. If any problems begin to develop, you want to make sure that they are addressed quickly, so your pups have the best chances of survival.

Most breeders will agree that the time from whelping through to the end of the first week is the hardest and most demanding time for any breeder – especially if their bitch is a first time mum.

Regular checks are vital

In those first few days, you will find yourself spending a lot of time checking in on your litter. In fact, many breeders end up sleeping next to the whelping box and waking up several times through the night to check everything is going smoothly, that all of the pups are suckling, and that the mother is not accidentally trampling or lying on her pups as she tries to get comfortable.

Many bitches can be a little unsettled in the first few days, especially new mums, and it may take a little while for them to get into the routine of being a mother. During this time, you may need to closely supervise to make sure that the needs of the pups are being met, and that the mother has every opportunity to recover from the birth and settle into her new role.

It may take a day or two for your bitch's milk production to swing into full production, so you need to make sure that the pups are getting enough to eat, suckling properly, and that everyone is warm and safe. You may even have to assist the pups onto the teats, and encourage the mother to lie still whilst the pups feed.

Checking the pups

Probably the best way to make sure that the pups are doing well is to weigh them regularly. You will have recorded a birth weight for each puppy during the whelping, so you have a start point for each pup. Although it is not uncommon for puppies to remain the same or to lose a little weight in the first 24 hours, from then on, they should be gaining weight every day even if it is only a few grams.

For the first few days or even the first week, most breeders weigh their pups twice a day, transitioning to once a day weigh ins once everyone is reliably gaining weight. You will need to make sure that you have a way of identifying each individual pup – either by their markings, colour, sex or via some other identifier such as a coloured ID collar – and make sure you record the weights in your litter records.

Weighing allows you to identify pups who may need extra help to keep up with the rest of their littermates, well before they get dehydrated or unwell. By identifying those pups that may be beginning to fall behind the others, you can make sure they get priority on the better teats at the next feed or give them an opportunity to feed without having to compete with their littermates.

Important!

*If you have a pup that is **losing** weight (other than a few grams in the first 12 to 24 hours), you should seek the advice of a veterinarian. Puppies can become dehydrated and weak very quickly if they are not feeding properly or not getting enough milk. Weak puppies struggle to suckle so things can quickly spiral downhill. Your veterinarian can determine the correct treatment and can show you how to safely supplement any pups that require it.*



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If you have a large litter where there are more pups than the mother has teats, you may have to rotate the pups in groups to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to have a good feed. Some mothers manage to feed a large litter quite successfully, but you may need to supplement her milk with a suitable dog formula if the pups are not all gaining weight at the same rate. Ask your vet for advice on supplemental feeding if you think it might be needed.

Each time you weigh the pups, you should also gently handle them all over and check them from head to toe. They should have a 'full' looking belly that should not be hard or painful to touch. Their nostrils should be clean and dry. You should pay particular attention to the area where their umbilical cord was attached. If there is a 'stump' remaining, it should gradually dry out and fall off. There should be no bleeding or discharge from the stump, and the area around it should be clean and dry. If your pups are wearing ID collars, you need to check that they are secure but not too tight.

Contented pups generally sleep most of the day. When they wake up, they will often move around and make some noise before the mother licks and cleans them, stimulating them to go to the toilet. Most mothers will consume the faeces/urine, although some do not. The pups will then head to the 'milk bar' for a feed, falling off the teats when they are full and drifting back to sleep.



Like human babies, puppies usually only cry when they are cold, hungry, find themselves separated from their mother or their littermates, or are in pain (such as when their mum accidentally sits or lies on top of them). So, as a breeder, you will learn that a happy litter is a quiet one.

If you have pups that seem to be constantly crying, something is likely to be wrong – so make sure that everyone is warm, no one is trapped or getting squashed, and that mum has plenty of milk.

Checking mum

As your bitch settles into her new role as a mother, you need to be checking her regularly. First time mothers can find the first few days of having a litter a bit overwhelming, but they should soon settle into a routine as their milk comes into full production and their uterus starts to contract and recover from the birth.

The aim is to have the mother calm and for her to lie down with the pups, rather than continually getting up and down. Every time the bitch gets up and down, there is the risk that she will accidentally lie on a pup as she resettles, so you need to make sure that the whelping box is comfortable for her (both in regards to temperature and bedding) and that disruptions that might cause her to get up are minimal. She should spend most of her day alternating between sleeping, licking and cleaning the pups, and feeding them.

It is normal for all mothers to be protective of their babies. In the first few weeks, your bitch may behave quite aggressively to any 'intruders' who threaten her pups. Make sure that you keep all other pets well away from the area, and try to keep visitors to a minimum. Although it is a very exciting time, and everyone will want to see the pups, now is not the time to have family and friends over – that can come later when things have settled down. First time mothers, in particular, can become very unsettled if there is too much going on, and this is something you want to avoid.



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After the birth, your bitch will continue to have a discharge for a few days, reducing in volume each day through the first week. The discharge should be similar in colour to that during the birth - expect any colour from dark red through to green black. The discharge should never be creamy coloured, and it should not have an odour. As part of your routine, you will need to continue to keep your bitch clean and free of knots – bathing, grooming or clipping as required.

Important!

Your bitch should be examined by a veterinarian if she continues to have significant discharge for more than a few days after the birth, if the discharge is bright red (fresh blood) or creamy in colour, or if the discharge has an unusual smell.

As part of your daily checks, you should both visually check and feel each one of her teats – checking the milk flow and feeling for any lumpiness, heat or soreness.

Any female animal that is producing milk is at risk of developing 'mastitis', a condition where the breast tissue becomes inflamed and/or infected. Mastitis can come on very suddenly and can be quite serious. The affected teat usually becomes red, hard, and painful to touch, and the milk coming from the teat can become thickened and discoloured. The bitch often has a very high fever and may become lethargic and stop eating and drinking altogether.

Important!

If you have any concerns about lack of milk flow or think that your bitch may have the first signs of mastitis, she should be checked by a veterinarian immediately.

For the first few days, the bitch may be very reluctant to leave her babies. You may have to put a leash on her and escort her outside for her to toilet. Most bitches will be in a hurry to return to their pups, but make sure she has properly emptied out before returning.

For the first few days after the birth, you may notice her bowel motions are a little loose, and very dark. This is due to the amount of afterbirth she will have eaten, so don't be too concerned. Her motions should return to normal within a day or two.

As her food and water dishes will be outside of the whelping box (so the puppies cannot accidentally fall into them), you also need to make sure she is eating and drinking enough. Making milk takes lots of fluids and nutrients, so it is important to encourage her to eat and drink. She should be eating a high quality diet, and fresh water should be available at all times.

Make sure that food is fresh and changed regularly if you plan to leave it out for her to access rather than serving 'meals'. Lactating bitches have very high nutritional needs, so if you are feeding meals, she should be having at least two a day, if not more.

Now is the time to begin supplementing her diet with calcium. You should ask your veterinarian which supplement is best for your bitch, and how much you should be giving her.

Some breeders like to offer their bitches milk to drink as well as fresh water. Milk contains some calcium, and can often tempt a fussy bitch to drink more fluids. As dogs cannot digest the lactose found in cow's milk, you should look to feeding a dog friendly milk, puppy formula, or lactose free option (ask your vet to recommend a suitable product). You do not want your bitch ending up with a tummy upset, so only offer small amounts to start with, or try diluting it by mixing a little bit into a second water dish.

Getting the temperature right

Newborn puppies cannot regulate their temperature and lack the ability to shiver. They are reliant on their mother and littermates for warmth. They can quickly become chilled if they become separated from them. Once chilled, they start to lose their ability to suckle, and can quickly become weak and dehydrated.



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Up until around four days of age, puppies prefer an ambient temperature of approximately 32 degrees, but you will find having the entire whelping area at this temperature will be uncomfortably hot for the mother. If the mother is too hot, she will tend to be quite restless, getting up and down, or getting in and out of the whelping box, potentially scattering or trampling her puppies every time she moves.

You can provide additional heat for the litter via a safely covered hot water bottle or heat pad, using a heated whelping box or a heat lamp. Each method has its own pros and cons – but most breeders agree that a heat lamp hung over one corner or end of the whelping box is usually the best.

The heat lamp allows both the pups and the mother to choose the place that they are most comfortable by moving closer to, or further away from the lamp. It is not uncommon to see a sleeping pile of pups under the heat of the lamp, with mum sleeping happily on the other side of the whelping box.

Cleaning & Hygiene

Now is the time to get into a routine in regard to cleaning. Every day you will need to move the puppies into a box or basket to keep them safe and warm, remove all of the bedding, clean and disinfect the whelping box, and then set everything back up with clean bedding. You will also need to clean and disinfect food and water dishes, and any other utensils that you use. Make sure all traces of disinfectant are rinsed well away before use.

This is an excellent time to examine, handle and weigh the pups as you will be moving them in and out of the whelping box anyway. If mum is likely to get in the way whilst you clean, it might be time for her to get some fresh air and have an opportunity to stretch her legs and go to the toilet outside.

Although many bitches keep their nesting area scrupulously clean, there will be times, especially with larger litters, where the bedding becomes soiled with post whelping discharge or the urine and faeces of the pups. Every time you check the bitch and puppies, you should make sure that any messes are cleaned up straight away. Depending on your situation, you may find that you need to do a full bedding change and clean more than once a day, but once a day is the absolute minimum.

