



# Caring for Your Litter - Weeks 3-5

Weeks 3 to 5 of a litter is arguably the most enjoyable time for any breeder. The pups are thriving, and their mother has settled into the routine. She is starting to be a little less protective and anxious about her pups, and the need for constant supervision has reduced. The pups are starting to move around and develop characters, and it is easy to spend hours just watching them as they learn and explore.

## Developmental milestones

From week 2 to week 3 is termed the 'Transitional Stage' as the pups transition from the 'Neonatal Period' into the 'Socialisation Period' of development (more on this later). Their eyes and ears begin to open, and they begin to be able to support their own weight and move around. They start to interact with their littermates and explore their world.

They are no longer totally reliant on their mother for toileting. Their baby teeth will be beginning to erupt, and by the third week, they will be ready to begin the first steps towards weaning (although this may take a little longer in toy and smaller breeds).

The pups are continually developing muscle tone and coordination. They start to get up on their feet and move around and may even begin escaping the whelping box.

By the 4th week, puppies are starting to play with each other and their mother, their little tails now wag, and they begin to vocalise – barking and growling at each other. For most breeds, the transition to solid food will be well underway, and their mother will be spending less time each day in with the pups.



## Housing considerations

Your whelping area will have been ideal for the first few weeks of life, allowing for warmth and security, containment and supervision. As the puppies grow and mature, you will find that they soon begin escaping the whelping box. It will be time for the litter to move to more spacious quarters more appropriate for the next period of growth and development.

If you have a large litter or a large breed of dog, this will probably occur sooner than with toy breeds or very small litters simply due to space considerations.

## A new puppy pen

Depending on the location of your whelping area, and the type of facilities that you have, you may simply be able to open up the area you are already using, or it may be time to move the litter to a new location. Ideally, the expanded puppy quarters will have the facility for direct access to a secure area outdoors and will be warm and draught free.

Your whelping box will most likely become the familiar 'bed' in the expanded puppy area, but with the 'door' now opened so that the puppies can safely get in and out of the whelping box as they choose. Outside of the whelping box or bed, there will need to be access to areas for play and exploration, toileting and fresh air.

Initially, the area for the pups outside of the whelping box should remain fairly small, but gradually expand as the pups grow and develop. Most breeders gradually increase the amount of access to areas outside the litter box as the pups grow by using temporary fencing/barricade arrangements that can be repositioned as required.

## **Important!**

*Make sure that any temporary fencing or barricades are well secured. Both the mother and pups may knock it, jump up on it or try to climb it and you don't want anything to collapse or fall on them.*



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Although your bitch will still have access to the puppy area, you need to make sure that she can rest and sleep away from the puppies if she chooses. She should have a separate raised bed outside of the whelping box where she can rest, and you may find that for a large part of the day she chooses to be away from the pups.

At this stage, you will most likely transition to feeding your bitch away from the puppy area, so her food and water bowls can be outside the puppy area. You will still need to provide access to water inside the puppy area, but this should be done in such a way as to minimise the risks of a puppy tipping the container or accidentally falling into the water bowl.

One idea is to provide water for the bitch in a water bowl that is hung high enough that she can easily access it, but the pups can't. You will also have to provide water for the pups in a separate bowl (or bowls) – something shallower and much lower – but still well anchored and unable to be tipped.

## Substrate preference & toilet training

Puppies are naturally very clean – they instinctively do not want to soil the area they sleep in. This behaviour develops at about three weeks of age when the puppies first start to toilet without their mother's stimulation, and when puppies first become able to move around on their own.

At this very early age, they start to develop a 'substrate preference' – this is an important life lesson where they learn what type of surfaces are for sleeping and which are for toileting. So there needs to be a definite difference between the two.

As a breeder you can facilitate this learning by providing a toileting area that is made of the substance you would like the pups to toilet on as adults – usually grass – that is very different from the bedding in the whelping box. Although this may seem difficult to achieve, a piece of roll out turf (which you can buy at Bunnings) sitting in a flat tray, or on a tarp can be used even in an inside puppy pen to provide a toileting area.

Some breeders choose to use a 'litter box' (filled with cat litter) or commercially available puppy 'pads' instead of grass, which will work just as well to provide a toileting substrate but may add an extra step to the toilet training if the end goal is for the pups to toilet outside.

The main thing is to provide a substrate that is **different** to that in the whelping box/bed. Litters of pups who have newspaper (or similar) both inside and outside of their whelping box miss the opportunity to learn this skill and can be much harder to toilet train later on. They grow up thinking the entire world is a toilet!

Because the pups cannot 'hold on' for very long, and their motor skills are just developing, this toileting area needs to be right next to the whelping box to start with. As they grow and are better able to move around, the toileting area can gradually move further away from their bed, and they will actively seek it when they need to toilet. As the puppies get bigger and more active, they will have access to outdoor areas as well, and their 'toilet' can transition to outside provided they have access at all times.

Regardless of what you choose, the toileting area will need to be kept scrupulously clean. Your bitch will no longer be cleaning the pups and eating their droppings so there will be plenty of puppy poop to pick up, especially if you have a large litter. The toileting substrate will need to be cleaned several times during the day and changed over completely at regular intervals.

## Areas for play and exploration

Your expanded puppy area will also need room for the puppies to play and explore safely. There needs to be space for toys and other items, and plenty of room for the pups to move about.

Most breeders will begin giving their pups access to outdoors at this age. Depending on the weather and time of year, this might be for short, supervised periods to start with, but then expanded to free access during the day as the pups get to an appropriate age. Outdoor areas allow pups to romp and sniff and can have larger, more complex activities or items for them to interact with.



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## ***Important!***

*The puppy pen's outdoor area needs to be securely fenced – keeping your pups safe from other animals and ensuring they cannot escape. There needs to be shade and shelter, and protection from inclement weather.*

## **Caring for your bitch – weeks 3-5**

As your pups reach about three weeks of age, the demands on your bitch's body will reach their highest point. This is the time of maximum milk production. She needs to be eating and drinking well, and you will need to be feeding her 2 to 3 times a day (maybe more if she has a large sized litter) to help her keep up with the demands of raising her litter.

As the pups are growing stronger, they will be feeding more vigorously, and extra care will need to be taken to ensure the hair on her sides, legs and near her teats does not become knotted or matted. As the pups get bigger, you will notice that the bitch may now feed them in different positions – maybe as she is sitting or standing instead of lying on her side.

You will also notice that your bitch will begin spending more time resting away from her pups, and the interval between feeds will begin to get longer. Her breaks from the pups will allow for a little more exercise and social interaction to occur, and she should be more relaxed about interacting with your other pets. You still need to watch that she does not get too protective of her pups, and make sure that your other pets are safely housed away from the litter of pups.

With milk production at its highest, the risk of mastitis continues to be significant, so you need to be checking her teats every day as you complete her daily health check, and seek advice should any of her teats feel harder or hotter than the others.

## **Eclampsia**

Bitches whose diet is deficient or unbalanced are at high risk of developing another life threatening condition called eclampsia. Eclampsia occurs if calcium levels drop below a critical level. Because calcium is vital for many normal body functions, including muscle contraction, bitches with eclampsia can deteriorate very quickly.

Eclampsia is most common in smaller breeds or bitches feeding a large litter, but any lactating bitch is at risk. Bitches who have eaten an unbalanced/incomplete diet before and during pregnancy, or who have been over supplemented with calcium whilst pregnant may be predisposed to developing this condition. It is most commonly seen at the peak of milk production but can occur at any time the bitch is producing milk.

The signs of eclampsia can come on quite suddenly and generally begin with weakness and restlessness. This quickly progresses to shivering and shaking, salivating, and trouble walking or moving around – your bitch may look wobbly or 'drunk' as she moves (called 'ataxia').

Soon they are unable to stand, and the shivering and spasms become full blown convulsions. If the calcium deficiency is not immediately addressed the bitch will lapse into a coma.

## ***Important!***

*If you think that your bitch has any signs of mastitis or eclampsia, you must contact your veterinarian immediately. Both conditions require urgent veterinary treatment.*



# Caring for Your Litter - Weeks 3-5

## Weaning the pups

Weaning the pups off their mother's milk and onto solid foods is a natural process that occurs over several weeks. The interval between feeds will be getting longer and longer, and the pups will start to erupt their baby or 'milk' teeth, making feeding a little less pleasant for the bitch when they suckle.

The weaning process will usually begin when the pups reach around three weeks of age. As a breeder, you can start to offer the pups some soft, almost sloppy food, and gradually transition them to eating solids and even gnawing on hard items by 6 to 8 weeks of age. During this phase, the pups continue to drink milk from their mother, but the amount and frequency of feeds will decrease as their nutritional needs start being met by the solid food.

It is not uncommon for bitches to begin the weaning process themselves by regurgitating food for their pups (usually stimulated by the pups licking at her face and lips). Although this may seem a little unpleasant to watch, the semi digested food is perfect for the pups and, in the wild, teaches them what is safe to eat.

The bitch will also begin restricting the pups access to her teats. This may be by getting up and walking away when she has had enough or even telling them when feeding time is over by growling or snapping at those pups who continue to feed.

Of course all bitches are different – some seem to lose interest in their pups quite early, others will continue to nurse and feed well past eight weeks of age. You need to allow your bitch to interact with her pups to the level she feels comfortable, and allow her to tell her pups off (provided she does not actually hurt them). Young pups are learning important life lessons at this time, and if you step in, you may deprive them of this.

## **Important!**

*Your bitch should continue to have access to her pups until AT LEAST 6 weeks of age.*

*It is not appropriate to 'force wean' a bitch – whereby she is abruptly separated from her pups – unless instructed to do so by your veterinarian for medical reasons. Sudden weaning can increase the risks of mastitis as milk pools in the teats. Instead, your bitch's milk production needs to be allowed to gradually dry up over time.*

Once your pups have reached three weeks of age, you can try them with a little bit of food. At this age, they are not ready to chew their food, so whatever you use needs to be able to be lapped up by the puppies. Because the pups are still beginning to get up on their feet and are not particularly coordinated, you will want a flat dish or plate with some food in it to allow them easy access.

For their 'first food' you can use puppy dry food that has been soaked in warm water, canned puppy food, or specific puppy 'starter' foods. Many breeders over the years have used 'Farax' baby food or Weetbix soaked with milk or water, so there are many options. Some start with just puppy milk – ask your mentor what they use for their litter's first feed.

## **Important!**

*You do need to be mindful that puppies lack the enzyme required to digest lactose, so regular dairy products are unsuitable and may cause the pups to have diarrhoea. You can look for puppy milk, or use milk replacer designed for puppies, both of which have reduced lactose and have been formulated to prevent tummy upsets. Ask your veterinarian to recommend a suitable product.*

At this first feed, the pups are likely to walk through the food and get food all over them, so many breeders choose to try feeding either outside, or somewhere that can be easily cleaned and does not mess up the puppy pen.





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It may take several days for all of the puppies to get the hang of eating from a dish, so be patient and be prepared to encourage the pups by placing them in the correct position and even putting a little food on their lips to get them started.

You should time the offering of solid foods to coincide with the pups waking up and looking for a feed, and not try just after they have been suckling on their mother. It usually only takes a few feeds before the pups get the idea, and you can move to offering them food in a shallow dish two or three times each day. You will soon find they come running when the food dish comes out!

The food offered can also transition gradually to a thicker/ firmer consistency. Make changes gradually over a number of feeds, and watch that the pups are eating well. At the end of each feed, you will need to dispose of any leftover food, but you will quickly get an idea of how much to prepare so that everyone gets a good feed and the dishes are licked clean.

All the pups can be fed from the same dish at this stage, but you need to make sure that there is plenty of space for all the pups to have access. There are always one or two greedy pups who gobble down their food and who will push others out of the way to get more. You need to make sure that you supervise each feed, and ensure everyone gets a fair go.

If you have a large litter, it may be easier to use several dishes of food, allowing better access for the smaller and less assertive pups. You want to make sure everyone has a full tummy when the meal is over, and make sure you clean food off any pups who have walked through it, or had it smeared over them by their littermates.



## **Important!**

*In most cases, you will want to exclude your bitch from the puppy's feeding times. This encourages the pups to eat from the dishes rather than suckle on their mother.*

*Depending on their temperament and appetite, some bitches are also very keen to eat the puppy food and can become a little protective of the dish when the pups approach – growling and snapping at the pups as they try to eat.*

*Instead, give your bitch a little time out, let the pups have a feed, and once the bowls are all empty and have been picked up, she can be let back in with them. She will most likely clean them up and give them a small 'top up' feed of milk.*

During weaning, the bitch's milk production will gradually decrease. Some bitches can become quite uncomfortable with teats full of milk, and if that is the case, you should allow the pups to suckle to reduce the pressure. At this time, there is a slight increase in the risk of mastitis due to the combination of stagnant milk and the risk of exposure to increased bacteria from the feet of exploring puppies. So be super vigilant with checking your bitch's teats.

## **Caring for your puppies – weeks 3-5**

### **Health care**

You will need to continue to give every puppy a full 'all over' health check every day. You will be looking for any scratches or wounds (often caused by their littermates during feeding time or rough play), and checking everything looks normal from head to tail. If your pups are wearing ID collars, you need to check they are secure and not too tight.

You should continue to trim your puppy's toenails as required – you will be amazed at how quickly they grow! Trimming the toenails helps prevent injuries to your bitch's teats and to other pups in the litter and also promotes correct growth and development of the feet.



# Caring for Your Litter - Weeks 3-5

## **Important!**

*You should seek veterinary advice if you find any injuries or abnormalities, or if a puppy has signs of illness. Early intervention is vital in youngsters, and if something is amiss, you don't want to risk it spreading to the entire litter.*

Until now, you will have been weighing, handling and checking each pup once or twice a day. Although you may still want to closely monitor your smallest pups, once the pups have doubled their birth weight, the frequency of weighing can reduce. At this stage, weekly weigh ins are fine.

The kitchen type scales will no longer be suitable for larger breeds, and you will have to transition to using human scales. If you start by weighing yourself and then weigh yourself whilst holding each pup, you can safely and accurately work record the weight of each pup.

At four weeks of age, this weight will be used to calculate the dose of worming product required for their second worm treatment. At this second treatment, you will most likely transition to a worming tablet rather than a liquid. This will treat more types of intestinal worm and can be given much easier now that the pups mouths and heads have grown. Your veterinarian can suggest a suitable product for the size of your pups.

## **The importance of socialisation**

### **What is the socialisation period?**

From 3 weeks through to around 12 to 14 weeks is the 'Socialisation Period' – recognised as a crucial part of puppy development.

Puppies will be learning what is normal in their environment - becoming accustomed to the sights, smells, sounds and textures that make up their world. Puppies at this age are naturally very inquisitive, and are quite bold, exploring their world.

Every experience a puppy has during this time provides information about the world around them. Socialisation involves exposure to people of different ages, people with hats, people with beards, people with high voices, and deep voices. Exposure to different sights and sounds, textures, places, and animals of all kinds.

Scientists have shown that a young puppy will 'absorb' all of these experiences during this window of time and, as long as they have not been unpleasant, will categorise them as 'normal'. It is also a time when puppies learn how to interact with others – people, dogs, cats, etc.- and learn appropriate manners and communication skills.

If they are deprived of these learning opportunities, they may not develop the skills to interact well as a mature animal. They will also be more likely to be fearful or at least suspicious of situations, sounds or individuals when they first experience them as an adult.

The flip side of this is that negative experiences at this early age, can lead to life long fears, so care has to be taken to minimise any negative interactions. Therefore, the goal is to provide plenty of positive experiences early on without overwhelming the puppy.

## **The breeder's role in socialisation**

As a breeder, your role is to provide your puppies with a variety of positive experiences and opportunities to learn as they develop and grow. Already you will have spent lots of time handling each puppy, but from this age, through to the time the puppies head off to their new homes, your goal will be to make sure your puppies have every chance to develop the skills they will need later in life.

## **Handling**

From weeks 3 to 5, the puppies need to meet and be handled by gentle and friendly people of all ages and sizes, especially men and children. This is a great time to have your potential puppy owners come to visit – you get to meet the family and answer their questions, they get to meet the mother and pups, and your puppies are given the opportunity to meet new people – everybody wins!



# Caring for Your Litter - Weeks 3-5

You want to get the pups used to typical types of handling and petting, physical examination all over their body, grooming tools and techniques, and gentle restraint.

## Introducing other animals

Initially, your pups will need to get used to exploring their outdoor puppy pen or your backyard on their own, or under the supervision of their mother.

Some mothers (especially first time mothers) can get over-excited the first few times the pups are outside. They suddenly decide to play with the pups even though the pups are only just starting to get the hang of walking, and can be a little rough. Other mothers will be a little anxious that their pups are wandering around and will be trying to herd them up or carry them back to their bed area.

Take things slowly, and watch both the puppies and their mother closely. You may choose to end the experience early the first few times so that things remain calm and positive. Once they are used to being outside with their mother, you may want to give your puppies opportunities to see or interact with other species – this could be anything from livestock, to other pets such as cats, rabbits or guinea pigs. If this is the case, you need to make sure everyone is safe – not just the pups!

If you are going to allow your puppies to interact with your other dogs or even your pet cats you need to make sure that all interactions are closely supervised, and that the older animals are well behaved around young pups. Please don't assume that because your pets all get on well, that they will automatically behave appropriately around small puppies.

Regardless of how well behaved they may be, you may need to step in if the pups are overwhelming your other pets or the other pets behave in a way that could frighten or hurt the pups. Some older dogs are so excited to play that they are a bit rough or bounce around as they try to encourage the pups to interact. They are just too exuberant.

Some adults become anxious if they get 'mobbed' by the pups. It is not uncommon for pups to try to suckle on someone who is not their mother (not fun if you are an adult male!). If this is the case, don't wait for the adult to tell the pups off – step in and separate everyone, and let things calm down.

## Toys and play

A large part of the pup's daily routine at this age will be spent playing with each other and with their mother. Through play, they develop motor skills and strength, coordination and balance.

Many of the interactions teach lessons in canine group dynamics – assertiveness, conflict resolution, body language and general doggy rules and manners.

Play can also involve learning and rehearsing behaviours used in hunting and killing prey – stalking, chasing, pouncing, and biting. The biting is an integral part of the pups learning to control their jaws – called 'bite inhibition'. Pups can be quite rough with each other, and it is not uncommon to see personalities emerging as the pups find their place in the social structure.

The pups will also spend a lot of the day exploring and interacting with all sorts of objects – this can be anything from toys that have been provided, to their bedding, to everyday items found in their puppy pen or outdoors in the garden. A lot of this exploratory behaviour involves mouthing and chewing – it is oral exploration.

This is a great time to provide a variety of 'safe to chew on' objects of all different textures, sizes and hardness. You can provide fixed or mobile objects, hanging toys, toys that make a sound and toys that move by themselves. If the pups are not interested in an item, you can make it more interesting by smearing a little food on it, or by making it 'come to life' by playing with it.



# Caring for Your Litter - Weeks 3-5

## **Important!**

*All toys should be checked daily for any damage and cleaned and disinfected as required. It is a good idea to rotate or vary the toys – having a few out each day rather than every single toy at once. This introduces novelty and ensures that the pups are not overwhelmed.*

## **Sounds, smells and surfaces**

Exposure to a variety of sounds, smells and surfaces is also an important part of the socialisation process.

If your pups are housed inside your home, they will already be experiencing the sounds and smells of a typical family – the excitement of children coming home from school, dinner cooking, the television and the sounds of home appliances.

If your pups are housed in a quieter area, or your household is not a busy one, you may want to consider how you might help your pups familiarise themselves with noises they would otherwise not experience until later in life.

You may want to have a radio playing in the puppy area, or use recordings of everyday sounds such as vacuum cleaners, microwaves, televisions and other appliances. There are a variety of sound CD's and recordings available, everything from the sounds of the country to the sounds of the city.

There are also recordings of the noises that are commonly frightening for adult dogs - heavy traffic, motorcycles, children, thunderstorms and fireworks.

These can all be played **very quietly** in the background in your puppy area provided that neither the pups or their mother show any signs of anxiety listening to them. Over time, the volume can gradually increase. The scary noises can also be paired with positive activities such as feeding time.

Because dogs live in a world where scent is their primary sense, they will already be focussed on new and unusual smells. You can create interest and novelty by placing scented objects in their pen as part of your daily enrichment and socialisation programs.

For those pups destined to perform tasks such as hunting or scent detection, now is the time to introduce them to objects and smells that will be important to them later in life.

Finally, you want to allow your pups to experience different surfaces to navigate across. Rough surfaces, small obstacles, slippery surfaces and even unsteady, irregular or mobile surfaces can form part of their learning.

Many breeders provide small ramps, platforms or other safe and small obstacles in the puppy pen for puppies to play on and learn to navigate. Pups may be given a chance to walk on tiled or vinyl floors, carpet or floorboards, rather than just concrete or grass. You will see the pup's confidence grow as these all become just part of their normal world.

You want your pups to explore at their own pace, but have the opportunity to see, smell, hear and feel many things. The possibilities are endless and really only limited by your imagination. The main thing to consider is that you do not want to overwhelm the pups with too many toys, experiences or activities at once. There still needs to be quiet time for sleeping and resting, and you do not want to have any puppies get hurt or frightened.

Although you will find loads of ideas on the internet – from elaborate play gyms to entire socialisation 'programs' you do not have to spend a lot of money to provide excellent socialisation opportunities. Cardboard rolls, boxes, and other items that you might otherwise place in the recycling bin at home can all become toys and objects of interest. Regular household items, items from the garden and shed, and family and friends can all become part of the program.

You just need to spend some time thinking about experiences that will help your puppies develop to their full potential and encourage normal behaviours and emotional resilience.