



# Caring for Your Litter - Weeks 1-2

The first two weeks of raising a litter can undoubtedly be a most stressful time – especially if you are new to breeding and your bitch is a first time mother.

Having a good mentor can certainly help. They can sit with you through the whelping, check in regularly to help you make sure everything is going smoothly, and are more than happy to share the knowledge they have gained from breeding successful litters.

Your vet is also an excellent source of accurate information and advice and should be your first point of contact if anything looks amiss.

The first two weeks of a puppy's life are called the 'neonatal period'. During this time, puppies are reliant on their mother for everything necessary to survive.

At this age, a puppy's eyes and ears are not yet open, they cannot regulate their own temperature, and they require stimulation to assist with toileting. Their world is relatively small, and they rely on their senses of smell and touch more than anything else.

## Keeping things calm and stress free

Once settled into motherhood, your bitch will spend most of her day in with her pups – feeding them, cleaning them and lying with them to keep them warm. She will usually only leave to eat and drink or to go to the toilet herself. Both the mother and the pups will spend a good part of the day sleeping.

During these first few weeks, you need to be making sure that things remain reasonably calm. This means minimising visitors and disruptions as much as possible. Although everyone will want to see your new pups, now is not the time to have lots of friends and family over – they can come and visit once the litter is a little older. If you have children, they need to be supervised around the whelping area at all times.

Remember that new mothers can be very protective of their babies and can behave quite aggressively if they feel that their pups are threatened. For this reason, all other pets should be kept well away from the whelping area, even though they will be attracted by the smells and sounds of the litter.

## Caring for the mother of the litter

Your bitch will hopefully have settled into being a mother fairly quickly. Although first time mothers might be a bit overwhelmed to start with but they generally only take a day or so to get into the routine of cleaning and feeding their pups. If your bitch had a particularly difficult birth, or if she required a caesarean operation, you may find that it takes a little longer for her to recover and get into the swing of motherhood.

If your bitch remains very unsettled, you need to first check that the whelping box and whelping area are not too hot. Although the pups need to be kept warm, if the bitch is too hot, she will be very restless. This can lead to her accidentally standing or lying in her pups as she gets up and down trying to get comfortable.

Another reason that bitches become very unsettled is if the puppies are crying, or if she is in pain. Pups generally only cry if they are hungry, cold or separated from their mother and littermates. They will also cry if their mother accidentally sits or lies on them – which is a very good reason for her to get up!

If the pups are crying, the first thing is to check that they feel warm to the touch. Next, you should check that your bitch is producing sufficient milk by gently expressing a few of her teats. If there does not seem to be good milk flow, or if the teats seem painful, she should be seen by your vet immediately.



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## Feeding the lactating bitch

Lactating bitches have very high nutritional needs, so monitoring her feed intake is essential. You want to make sure that she is eating enough to maintain her own body and grow her pups. Over the first two weeks, her milk production will gradually increase – reaching its maximum at about 2 to 3 weeks – this is the time of peak demand on her body.

### **Important!**

*Your bitch needs to be eating high quality, nutritionally complete food and drinking plenty of fluids. She may also require supplemental Calcium.*

*Speak to your vet about the diet you plan to feed and make sure it is suitable for the heavy demands of lactation.*

*Regardless of what you are feeding, you need to make sure that the food is always fresh, and that your bitch is fed **AT LEAST** two or three times a day.*

In the first week, many bitches are so intent on looking after their pups that they may not even want to get up out of the litter box to access their food and water bowls. If this is the case, you may have to regularly bring the bowls to her to encourage her to take in enough food and water.

### **Important!**

*DO NOT leave food and water bowls inside the whelping box as there is a risk that the pups could accidentally tip them or even fall in and drown.*

Some breeders choose to leave a bowl of dry food in the whelping area outside the whelping box so the bitch can access food at any time. If you decide to do this, it is best to only provide a meal's worth of food in the bowl at a time. You can then make sure any uneaten food is disposed of and replaced with fresh dry food a number of times throughout the day, rather than having the food go stale or spoil. You will also have to be careful that any food you leave out for the bitch to access does not attract pests such as ants.

### **Important!**

*Because her nutritional needs are so high at this stage, if your bitch stops eating, goes off her food for more than a meal or two, or is vomiting you should contact your veterinarian immediately for advice.*

## Daily health checks

Twice each day you should be checking your bitch all over - from head to toe – noting any changes or potential problems. It is usual for her to continue to have some discharge for the first week, but this should slowly dry up as her uterus begins to return to normal. Any discharge should be dark red to greenish black in colour - it should never be creamy in colour or have a strong odour.

At every check, it is important to feel each one of her teats – checking the milk flow and feeling for any lumpiness, heat or soreness. Any bitch producing milk is at risk of mastitis (infection and inflammation of the breast tissue), and it can quickly become life threatening to a bitch whose body is already under a lot of stress.

Mastitis can come on very suddenly. The bitch will usually have a very high fever, become lethargic or even unable to walk. One or more of her teats may appear red and hard, and they are often hot and painful to the touch.



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The milk produced in the affected teat will change from a normal colour to a greenish yellow colour and can become very thick and clotted, coming out in lumps. Sometimes, the teat infection builds up like an abscess and bursts, leaving large open wounds and permanently damaged breast tissue.

## **Important!**

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

## **Grooming and exercise**

Even though your bitch will be busy with her pups, she still needs a little daily exercise and individual attention. This may simply be a few laps of the backyard, a game, and a little bit of time outside in the fresh air. Although she will most likely be very anxious to get back to her pups, you can encourage her to move around, even if you have to put her on a leash to do it.

If you have other pets who will be in the yard, you will need to supervise any interactions closely, especially to start with. Your bitch will smell very interesting, but she may not want other dogs approaching her or sniffing her. She may also be a bit anxious being away from her litter and may be concerned that the other animals might get access to her pups.

Make sure you manage any other pets to minimise the risks of upsetting your bitch, and make sure that they cannot gain access to the whelping area whilst you are not there.

Don't forget to check her coat all over for knots or tangles. The combination of nursing puppies and increased licking and cleaning can easily cause the hair to start to matt.

You may need to take some time out to groom your bitch – combing out any knots, or trimming additional hair away. Some bitches require almost daily bathing to keep them clean in the first week or so, even if it is just rinsing the area around the tail and vulva, and down the back of the legs.

If you are bathing your bitch make sure that she is dry before she returns to the whelping box as you don't want the pups getting wet and chilled.

## **Caring for your new litter of pups**

At this age, the biggest risks to the pups are cold and hunger. Pups can dehydrate very quickly, and they have little to no body stores, so they need to feed frequently to survive and grow. Your main priorities should be to make sure they are getting enough to eat, that they remain safely in the whelping box, and that the whelping box is kept at the right temperature.

Generally, the pups will naturally huddle together, often forming a 'pile' under the heat lamp. The whelping box should prevent pups from getting too far away. Still, occasionally a pup may become separated from the rest of the litter. These pups generally cry quite loudly, and the bitch may get up to either nuzzle them towards the rest of the litter or even pick them up and carry them gently with their mouths.

If you do find a pup that has been accidentally separated from the rest of the litter and feels a bit cold, you should warm it up straight away. Chilled pups quickly lose their suckle reflex, and then become dehydrated because they cannot feed. If they don't feed, they become weak and quickly spiral downhill. You can warm a puppy up on a heat pad or covered hot water bottle, or can use your own body heat by tucking the pup up inside your shirt until you have the hot water bottle organised.

If you have a puppy that might have been chilled, you need to watch closely that it is feeding correctly. Often these pups look like they are feeding, but they are not sucking properly, and therefore don't get enough milk to return to normal. If you have any concerns, please ask your veterinarian for advice.



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## Supervising feeding time

In the first week, you should be weighing the pups twice each day, and making sure that all of the pups continue to put on weight. Weighing the pups allows you to identify any pups that might be falling behind or not getting enough to eat, well before they become dehydrated or weak.

Even after a day or two, you will notice that the bigger stronger pups will start to push their smaller brothers and sisters out of the way so that they get the best access to the teats, so your job is to supervise feeding time and make sure everyone gets a fair go.

Any pups that have not put on weight, or the pups who have put on the least amount of weight, should be given priority at the next feed. Usually, this means physically placing those pups on the teats at the back (these are usually the 'best' teats in terms of milk production), and making sure that the stronger pups do not knock them off. You will be amazed at how persistent the stronger pups are!

If you have a large litter, you may need to rotate the pups in groups for feeding so that everyone has the opportunity to have a proper feed, or you may need to supplement feed some or all of the pups. Your vet will be able to recommend a safe puppy milk supplement and show you how to feed the pups.

### **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.*

## Daily checks for your puppies

Every puppy in the litter needs to have some individual handling and a health check at least once a day. Regular gentle handling is an integral part of a puppy's social development, even though the pups cannot see or hear properly at this time.

Most breeders incorporate handling, weighing and health checks with daily cleaning of the whelping box as the pups have to be moved to facilitate the cleaning. The pups are transferred to a basket or box with a heating pad or hot water bottle in it whilst the whelping box is stripped, cleaned, disinfected, and the bedding is replaced.

As each pup is returned to the litter box, it is weighed and checked all over, and the pup's daily records are completed.

As you check each puppy, you want to make sure that the pup has gained weight, has a full but soft belly, is clean, and feels warm. If it is wearing an ID collar, you need to check and adjust it to ensure it is secure but not too tight. You also want to check that the remnants of the umbilical cord (if any) are clean and dry and that there are no signs of injury, redness or irritation anywhere on the puppy.

As you go over each puppy, you need to check their feet and feel between their toes, making sure that they don't have any of mum's hair tangled around their toes, and that they have not accidentally stepped in any droppings.

Finally, you need to check the puppy's toenails and make sure that they are not getting too long or too sharp. If they are, you can carefully trim the tip off using a pair of nail clippers.

## As they get a little older

As the puppies get a little older, handling can extend to having a variety of people gently hold them for short periods of time. In a typical family household, this happens anyway as family members have a little 'cuddle time' with the pups each day, but you may even allow a few select visitors to handle the pups at this stage.



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As you watch the puppies, you will see that they are slowly developing strength in their legs, and they will start transitioning towards supporting their own weight. Somewhere between days 10 and 14, you will notice that the puppy's eyes begin to open, and not long after that, their ears. This is always an exciting time as a whole new phase of development is about to begin.

## Worming

When they reach two weeks of age, it is time for the puppy's first worming treatment.

Puppies are commonly infected with Roundworm as it passed to the puppies through the mother's milk. Because their mother is cleaning the puppies and ingesting their droppings, the worm infection can cycle back to her – so everyone needs to be wormed at the same time.

Your bitch will need to be weighed and dosed with an 'allwormer' product – ask your vet to recommend one that is safe to give to lactating bitches.

Each of the pups will also need to be weighed and dosed with an appropriate amount of 'puppy wormer' – a liquid wormer is often easiest to give at this first worming as the pups are quite small. Your vet will recommend an effective product and can show you how to dose the pups safely.

## Cleanliness & Hygiene

One of the most important jobs as a breeder is keeping everything in the whelping area clean. Having a litter is a very messy business!

By keeping everything scrupulously clean, you reduce the risks of disease transmission – both for the mother and the pups.

The whelping box and whelping area should be cleaned out thoroughly every day – regardless of how clean it may look. This means removing all used bedding, cleaning and disinfecting all of the surfaces of the whelping box and the surrounding whelping area, cleaning and disinfecting food and water bowls, and then setting everything back up and placing clean, fresh bedding in the whelping box once it is dry.

## Important!

*Whenever you are cleaning, remember to carefully follow the instructions on any cleaning products, detergents or disinfectants you are using, and make sure you rinse any food or water bowls thoroughly before using them again.*

Although most bitches keep the whelping box area scrupulously clean, there will be times where the bedding becomes soiled with post whelping discharge or the urine and faeces of the pups. If this is the case, you need to see to it straight away to prevent puppies crawling through it on their way to get a feed.

With larger litters, or bitches who are not keen to eat their puppy's droppings, you may find yourself doing a full cleanout two or three times a day to keep things clean, so you need to be prepared with plenty of clean bedding at the ready.

## Enjoy your litter

Although having a litter is a lot of hard work, it is also quite a magical time. Most breeders find themselves simply sitting and watching the mother and pups for hours on end.

Already there will be characters developing within the litter – the pushy pup, the one that is always off exploring, and the one that sleeps in all kinds of odd positions. You will also have a newfound respect for your bitch, and marvel at how she has transitioned from a valued family pet to a dedicated and attentive mother.