GREYHOUND RACING VICTORIA

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Breeder's Education Pack

Unit Three – Whelping a Litter

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Date Published 2008

3 Whelping a Litter

As your bitch's due date draws nearer it is important that you are well prepared for the impending birth. Make sure you are ready well ahead of time, so that you do not have to panic if the bitch decides to give birth a few days earlier than expected.

You will need to decide where the bitch is going to whelp the pups. Most people use a 'whelping box' – a wooden or fibreglass box with sides that allow the bitch to jump in and out, but high enough to keep the pups confined. The whelping box needs to be located somewhere warm, dry and quiet where it is easy to access and there is good light. Puppies are particularly susceptible to the cold, so making sure that the whelping box is out of drafts is important.

You may want to borrow or hire a whelping box if it is your first litter or your mentor might be able to loan one to you. Make sure the whelping box has been thoroughly cleaned inside and out with dilute bleach and then rinsed clean so there are no fumes or residue. Once the whelping box is in place, line it with layers of newspapers and then place some bedding on top. You will want to get your bitch used to sleeping in the box a few weeks ahead of time otherwise she might be restless and unsure when you suddenly move her to a new place.

Newspaper is used inside the whelping box as most bitches will dig and shred the bedding as they start to go into labour and the newspaper can be easily replaced. Newspaper is also absorbent and can also be replaced as often as necessary if it gets soiled during the birthing process (which can be quite messy).

You will need to make sure that the whelping box is either in a warm room, or that you have a safe heat source to keep the pups warm. A heat lamp over one end of the whelping box can be a good idea as it gives the pups a choice of temperatures, but make sure that it is hung high enough that the bitch will not hit it or burn herself.

Finally you will need to organise a few things to have on hand:

Pen and paper – for writing down the weights of pups, and the times they are born

Thermometer – for monitoring the temperature of the bitch prior to whelping

Gloves – if you don't like getting your hands dirty

Scales – for weighing the pups

Cotton thread and scissors – for tying off umbilical cords if needed

Betadine

Clean towels

Hot water bottle(s)

Plenty of Newspaper (no staples)

Garbage bag(s) – for all the soiled bedding

Your vet will also be able to give you advice and provide you with anything else that you might need. Most Vet Clinics can help you with a 'Whelping Kit' that contains Oxytocin and Calcium injections along with instructions, but as a novice breeder, a call to the vet when things go wrong might be the safer option.

Remember: make sure that you are well organised and prepared for the whelping - well before the whelping is due to take place

How Will I Know When the Bitch is Going to Whelp?

Once you have bred your bitch you will have an 'expected date of whelping'. If your bitch has been put to frozen semen, the vet will have given you a date of whelping that is based on the timing of ovulation, rather than the actual date the bitch was inseminated. Make sure you write the date down on your calendar. The length of pregnancy is usually 63 days (9 weeks) from the time of ovulation.

During the last week of pregnancy, you can monitor the bitch's rectal temperature once or twice a day. The normal temperature for dogs is 38-39 degrees Celsius. It is normal for the rectal temperature of the bitch to drop below 37 degrees approximately 24 hours prior to the birth, so this is one way to monitor her.

Loss of appetite and restlessness are other signs to watch for. Some bitches go off their food a couple of days out, but others will eat right up to the hour before. Nesting will also occur in the last few days, although this will become more intense as the first stages of labour start.

If there is concern that the bitch has gone over time without any signs of whelping, or a caesarean is being contemplated, a blood progesterone level can be done to determine if the bitch is ready to whelp. Progesterone levels drop significantly at the time of whelping, and can be used to determine if it is the right time to carry out a caesarean.

Remember: you need to make sure you know how to tell you bitch is about to whelp – revisit the signs well before the whelping is due to take place. Have an action plan in place should things go wrong.

The First Stage of Labour

During this stage the bitch will usually start nesting and is quite restless. She may shiver and shake, or may pant heavily. During this stage the body is preparing for the pups to be born but there are no visible contractions. Some bitches may vomit during this early stage of labour. Some bitches will become very clingy, others will hide. Make sure your bitch is in the whelping box at this time, otherwise she may end up having her pups somewhere else. Bitches like dark, quiet places, and she may hide. Many novice breeders get caught out when their bitch gets under the house or behind the shed when she is about to whelp, and it can become very difficult to get her (and possibly puppies) out.

This first stage of labour may last a few hours, or even a day. Many bitches will show signs of impending labour during the day, but it is common for bitches to whelp at night.

The Second Stage of Labour

As she moves into the second stage of labour the bitch will actually start having contractions. The contractions may be spaced out to start with, as the first puppy usually takes the longest time to be born. Eventually the bitch will really bear down, and usually 4-5 of these hard contractions will see the first pup born.

In the uterus, each pup is enclosed in a sac of fluid and often the first thing that will be seen as the pup emerges is a 'bubble' of fluid at the bitch's vulva. As she pushes some more, the pup will appear – pups can be born head first or tail first – so you will either see a nose, or feet and a tail. It may take a few contractions to fully pass the pup.

Once the pup has been born, it is vital that the sac is removed so that the pup can breathe. This is usually something that the bitch will do. She will chew and lick at the pup until the sac breaks. She will then lick and nose the pup stimulating its respiration. If the bitch does not break the sac, you may have to step in and clear the membranes and fluid from the pups mouth so that it can breathe. You can also hold the pup in a towel and rub it to simulate the licking of the bitch. Sometimes you will have to do this if two pups are born close together and the bitch cannot deal with them both at the same time.

Remember: the steps of a normal whelping – revisit them well before the whelping takes place. Whilst unlikely, you may need to help the bitch. Have an action plan in the event that things go wrong.

Stage Three of Labour

The third stage of labour is the passing of the placenta. Sometimes the placenta will come out with the puppy, other times it will be passed a few minutes later. It is normal for the bitch to eat the placenta and to chew through the umbilical cord. In most cases you will not need to do anything at all except supervise her to make sure she is not too rough (especially first time mothers).

If the bitch does not chew through the cord, or if the cord seems to be bleeding, you can tie off the cord with some clean cotton thread about a centimetre from the body of the pup. The excess cord can then be cut off with scissors. You can then dab the stump with a bit of Betadine to help prevent infection. After a day or two the umbilical cords will dry out and fall off all by themselves.

The bitch will then repeat the second and third stages of labour until all of the puppies are born. The time between puppies varies, and some bitches will rest even an hour or two between puppies. The main thing is to watch her closely. If she seems settled and calm, things are probably fine, if she is restless or contracting, then a puppy should appear within a short time or there may be problems.

Sometimes it can be hard to tell if the bitch is actually finished giving birth or whether she is just resting in between pups. If you can get her to stand you can gently feel her abdomen to see if you can feel more pups. Sometimes there will be a pup tucked right up under the ribs that might be hard to feel.

Make sure that you make a note of the time that each pup was born. This way if there are any problems you will know how long since the last pup was born. You can also note the colour, sex and weight of each pup as they are born. It might be a good idea to have an experienced person sit with you or at least be 'on call' during your first few whelpings. Otherwise, you might need to phone your vet if you are not sure if things are going to plan.

As a rough guide of things not going to plan:

- More than 30-40 minutes of strong contractions with no puppy
- More than 15 minutes of contractions with a pup visible
- More than 3 hours between pups
- A green discharge
- Lots of bright red blood
- A bitch that is very restless or who is crying or licking frantically at her vulva

Are all signs that things may be going wrong. Remember the earlier you get help the higher the likelihood of having live pups.

** These times are estimates, and it is best to confirm with your veterinarian when they feel that you should seek assistance.

If a pup is visible it may be possible to assist the birth, but be careful not to pull hard on a puppy's head or tail as there is a definite risk of dislocation. Any assisting by pulling should be directed in an outward and downwards direction, towards the hocks of the bitch. If the pup seems stuck and some gentle traction does not help, seek immediate assistance.

Once the pup has been born and is starting to move about, it should suckle as soon as possible. The first milk of the bitch (the colostrum) is full of important antibodies that help keep the pups safe from infection. If the pup is having trouble, it may need to be assisted onto a nipple. The suckling of the pups helps to stimulate the natural release of the hormone oxytocin in the bitch which helps with milk let-down and stimulates contraction of the uterus.

Remember: you need to be able to recognise when things are not going to plan – revisit the signs of complications well before the whelping takes place. Have an action plan in place in the event that things go wrong.

When the Bitch is Finished

When you are happy that the bitch has had all of her pups it is a good idea to take her out for a toilet break and give her a clean up. Some bitches get so messy they need a quick bath, but make sure that you dry her completely so she does not get cold. You can also encourage her to have some food and water, although many bitches will be too concerned about getting back to their litter to think about eating.

Now is the time to clean up all the soiled or wet newspaper and place clean bedding in the box. The pups can be placed in a basket or box with a hot water bottle (the hot water bottle needs to be wrapped in a towel so they do not get burned) whilst you do this.

Make sure once she is settled again that all of the pups have had a good feed and that any smaller or weaker pups have a chance to access to the best teats (the ones at the back). The bitch will probably spend the next few hours resting and cleaning the pups. It is normal for the bitch to have some discharge, and it may continue for 4-6 weeks. The colour of the discharge may be reddish brown through to a blackish green, but should never be smelly or creamy in colour. If you are concerned about the amount or the colour of the discharge, ask your vet for advice.

Many vets recommend that you bring the bitch and pups in to the clinic within the 12-24 hours after birth (usually the next morning) for a post-whelping check. They will check that the bitch has truly passed all of the pups and give her an injection of Oxytocin to help clear out her uterus. They also check that she has adequate milk and inspect all of the puppies to see that they are healthy.

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