

Important Terms to Know

- **Whelping** - the act of a dog giving birth (a female dog is called a bitch)
- **Queening** - the act of a cat giving birth (a female cat is called a queen)
- **Parturition** - the general term for giving birth
- **Multiparous** - having two or more offspring at birth
- **Colostrum** - early milk that is rich in antibodies and protein
- **Dystocia** - difficult birth (usually requiring manual assistance or c-section)

Stages of Labor

Gestation of dogs and cats is **60-63 days**. When labor begins:

Stage 1

Restless, may seek seclusion or refuse food. This stage may last for 6-24 hours.

Stage 2

Contractions begin. A small fluid-filled sac protrudes from the vulva, encompassing the puppy, and has attached placenta. Puppies normally are nose first with abdomen down. Up to 1/3 of puppies may present with hindquarters first (breech).

Stage 3

Resting stage in between each delivery. Expulsion of afterbirth. May last 10 minutes or less, or up to an hour.

Care After Parturition

Natural Birth

- After puppy or kitten is expelled from the birth canal, the mother should lick or chew the sac open. If she does not, then the sac should be manually broken open.
- The neonate should have its mouth suctioned if it is having any difficulty breathing, and its body should be stimulated with a towel.
- The neonate should be encouraged to suckle on the mother immediately after birth. The suckling causes oxytocin release in the mother and helps with uterine contractions and milk letdown.

Cesarean Section

- After the neonate is removed from the uterus and handed over, the mouth should be suctioned several times to remove any mucus or fluids that may be blocking the airway.
- “Slings” of a puppy or kitten is no longer recommended to facilitate clearing of the airways.
- The neonate should be stimulated with warm towels to dry the fur and help with circulation. Stimulating the neonate by rubbing the body in this manner helps to stimulate breathing and responsiveness, especially in a neonate delivered by c-section that may have been exposed to anesthetic drugs. If necessary, supplemental oxygen should be administered. Sometimes a drop of doxapram (Dopram) is administered orally to help stimulate breathing
- The puppies or kittens should be kept warm and immediately placed with the mother after she is out of surgery and it is safe to do so.

Nutrition

After birth, the nutritional demands of the lactating mother are 2-3 times normal. It is advised that a puppy food (higher in calories) be fed to the mother during pregnancy and until puppies are weaned. Weaning should begin around 5 weeks of age. Food intake of the bitch should decrease after the puppies are weaned; this will help decrease milk production.

When Delivery Assistance May Be Necessary

- The puppy or kitten is stuck in the birth canal for longer than 5 minutes.
- The mother is having strong contractions for 30 minutes with no delivery.
- Labor is weak and goes on for 3-4 hours intermittently without delivery.
- More than 4 hours have passed and more puppies are expected.
- The mother has a dark discharge and no delivery or labor in 3-4 hours. (The discharge CAN be normal, but should be followed by puppy delivery shortly thereafter)
- If the mother has been pregnant for more than 65 days.

Other Facts to Know

- **Eclampsia** - (Hypocalcemia): the bitch is losing more calcium in the milk than she is taking in. Signs of this are muscle twitching, seizures, drooling, fever, extreme restlessness, or panting. This is life-threatening, and the pet should receive immediate veterinary attention.
- **Mastitis** - infection of a mammary gland. May cause lethargy and fever. The gland becomes hard, may be purple or red in color, and may have a foul smell or abnormal color to the milk; is typically painful.
- Sometimes puppies and kittens are orphaned. These neonates should be fed a commercial, species-appropriate milk replacer. Cow's milk should not be given. Soft food may be introduced as early as 5 weeks or when they are ready for solids.
- Puppies and kittens will open their eyes around 10-14 days of age.
- The temperature of the mother will drop 1 to 2 degrees within 24 hours of parturition.