

Pregnancy in Dogs

- In dogs, pregnancy lasts 56 to 70 days, or about 2 months.
- Diagnosis is usually made by manually feeling the puppies in the uterus or by radiography (x-rays) and/or ultrasound.
- While toy breeds tend to have smaller litters of one to four puppies, larger breeds may carry as many as eight to 12 puppies.

What Is Pregnancy?

Pregnancy is the time between conception and birth when puppies develop and grow inside the mother's uterus. By day 40, the fetus has eyelids, claws, and hair, and the gender is apparent. While toy breeds tend to have smaller litters of one to four puppies, larger breeds may carry as many as eight to 12 puppies. After 56 to 70 days, or about 2 months, puppies are ready to be born.

What Are the Signs of Pregnancy?

During the first few weeks of pregnancy, dogs may show few or no signs of it. Occasionally, pregnant dogs lose their appetite or vomit, much like morning sickness in humans. Physical changes are most obvious in the last 3 weeks of pregnancy, when the abdomen and breasts (mammary glands) begin to enlarge. In the days before birth, there may be a milky discharge from the nipples.

You may notice behavioral changes in your dog during the last few weeks of pregnancy. A pregnant dog may shred bedding and papers to create a nest. She may also become irritable and seek privacy. At this time, it is best to limit her contact with small children.

What Is a False Pregnancy?

Hormones may cause some female dogs to show signs of pregnancy, even when no mating has occurred. These signs include changes in appetite, weight gain, nesting, mothering inanimate objects, and even milk production and labor. Usually, signs resolve within 3 weeks. Your veterinarian can examine your dog to determine if the pregnancy is false.

How Is Pregnancy Diagnosed?

While blood tests are available to check for pregnancy, the results may not be accurate during the first few weeks of pregnancy. Veterinarians often prefer to palpate the abdomen (apply light pressure with the hands) to feel the developing puppies as early as 3 to 4 weeks after mating. Ultrasound may be used at the same time to detect developing embryos. The best way to detect pregnancy may be with an abdominal radiograph (x-ray). A fetus's developing bones are visible at about day 45, enabling the veterinarian to count the number of puppies and assess fetal positioning before birth.

Nutrition and Exercise

It may be tempting to feed your dog more in the early weeks of pregnancy, but significant fetal growth doesn't take place until the last 3 weeks before birth. That's why the mother should be fed normal amounts of a good commercial maintenance food until about the sixth week of pregnancy. At that time, the amount of food should be increased by 20% to 25%; at the eighth week of pregnancy, the regular amount of food should be increased by 50%.

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In the last few weeks of pregnancy, your veterinarian may recommend gradually switching your dog to a diet with higher levels of energy, protein, and minerals. As the uterus expands, it may compress the stomach, so your dog may not be able to eat a full meal in one sitting. If this occurs, feed your dog smaller, more frequent meals. In general, supplements should be avoided, especially those with added vitamin D or calcium. Consult your veterinarian before giving any supplements.

Common Conditions

A moderate amount of exercise during the first 4 to 6 weeks of pregnancy can help the mother maintain muscle tone, which is important for the birthing process. However, care should be taken not to overexert the dog during the final weeks, when her abdomen and mammary glands are enlarged.

Prenatal Exams

If you suspect that your dog is pregnant, consult your veterinarian. He or she will examine your dog

and counsel you on proper nutrition, exercise, and veterinary and home care.

In general, the administration of any drugs during pregnancy should be avoided. Some drugs may cause adverse effects in the mother or harm the unborn puppies. If possible, vaccines should not be given during pregnancy. When in doubt, ask your veterinarian about any medications, including topical flea and tick treatments, before administering them to your pregnant dog.