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PROBLEMS AT BIRTH

What happens if my dog has trouble delivering her puppies?

Although the majority of dogs will give birth without the need for assistance, problems can arise which require veterinary attention. It is important to closely monitor your pet during birthing and seek veterinary care if you have any concerns.

How will I know that she is starting?

When whelping is imminent the female often stops eating (although this is not always the case) and her rectal temperature often drops below 38.1°C (100°F). The female will often go into corners and start scratching to make her bed. If you see any of these signs, you may wish to contact our staff since this is the first stage labor when the birth canal starts to dilate.

This is followed by second stage labor when the female starts to forcibly contract her uterus. These contractions start gradually and increase in intensity, frequency and duration. If intense contractions have been occurring for 20 to 30 minutes without a puppy being delivered, it is important to contact our staff.

Other situations where veterinary help is needed include:

1. A mother straining for 8-10 minutes with a puppy or fluid filled bubble stuck in the birth canal
2. A female with a body temperature of more than 39.5°C (103°F)
3. Bleeding from the vagina for more than ten minutes
4. A green discharge from the vagina without puppies being born

Are puppies, like babies, sometimes born prematurely?

Premature delivery does occur but it is not as common as thought. Often these so-called premature deliveries have been an error in mating dates or a miscalculation in gestation period (period of pregnancy). This is usually 63 days.

How can I tell if the pups are premature?

Truly premature puppies may be small, thin and have little or no hair. Survival is possible but they require an enormous amount of care and often have to be hand fed since they are unable to suckle. Sometimes they have to be fed by stomach tube (gavage feeding).

Mothers will often reject premature puppies and they soon die of hypothermia (low body temperature). Excessive heat (hyperthermia) can be just as harmful as hypothermia so the temperature of the puppy's environment must be carefully controlled. Environmental temperature must be maintained at around 30°C (90°F) and the box must be large enough so that the puppies can move away from the heat source if necessary.

The puppies must also be kept in a moist atmosphere if they are being raised away from the mother. The mother usually licks and cleans the puppies frequently. As a result, not only is the environment warm, it is also moist. You can provide a moist environment by placing warm, damp cloths in the box with them.

How long will I have to hand raise premature puppies?

Once the puppies are stronger and able to suckle, the mother will very often take over herself. It is very important to try and ensure they are fed her "first milk" which contains necessary antibodies to help prevent infection.

If the puppies can suck, we will show you how to hold them on to the mother's teats. If this fails, we will advise you on milk replacement and proper puppy bottles.

Although very rewarding if the puppies survive, hand raising puppies is extremely challenging and many puppies fail to survive.

Are some of the puppies likely to be stillborn or die after birth?

With animals that have multiple births, like dogs, it is not unusual for some of the offspring to either be born dead or to die shortly after birth. Sometimes a stillborn puppy will disrupt the birthing process resulting in dystocia or birthing complication.

At other times the dead puppy may be born normally.

Determining the cause of these neonatal deaths is often impossible without a full post mortem (autopsy), including bacteriological examination and submission of tissues to a histopathologist.

Some causes of neonatal death can be prevented. It is important to consult with your veterinarian regarding any problems with your pet's pregnancy or whelping.

I am told that with some breeds, Caesarian sections are more common than a normal delivery. Is this true?

Unfortunately in certain breeds there are strains and families that do seem to have increased risk of dystocia (difficult birth) resulting in the need for a Caesarian section. The timing of this is always difficult. If performed too late it can result in dead puppies and if embarked upon too early, it may have subjected the bitch to unnecessary surgery. It is a matter that always requires full and frank discussion between you and your veterinarian.