

Beginner's Guide to Whelping Puppies

by World Ready Pets



Witnessing the birth of a litter is exciting, amazing, meaningful, nerve wracking and gross. I highly recommend it.

Definitions

Whelping, or to whelp, means to give birth and is the term used for dogs.

Bitch is the term for a female dog and dam means female parent but, in this article, I'll be less formal and say 'mom'.

Included in this Guide

- [How to Prepare for Whelping \(Birth\)](#)
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- [Temperature Log](#)
- [Whelping Log](#)

Reasons Not Worry

If you are nervous about the birth of a litter, just remember that dog mamas have been giving birth without our help for thousands of years! You may not even be there because you're at work or it's the middle of the night, and this is OK. Generally speaking, it is best to intervene as little as possible. Too much help may interfere with natural maternal processes and, consequently, she may reject her offspring. If mom is alert, tending to her puppies and they are squirming and noisy, it's safe to leave them alone. Just take a deep breath, stay calm and do the best you can.

Reasons to Worry a Little

On the rare occasion that something does go wrong, it can be quite stressful and upsetting. Sad but true: Sometimes puppies are born dead or die shortly after birth. For whatever reason they fail to thrive and sometimes there is nothing you can do. If the death of a puppy is more than you can handle, you might consider not being present during the birth or that whelping a litter may not be for you. Witnessing a birth can be a great experience for children, too but keep in mind the potential for a poor outcome.

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How to Prepare for Whelping (Birth)

Whelping Area

You'll need a whelping box in a quiet, temperature-controlled room with a door to keep mom in and other animals out.

- Whelping Box: A space designed for dogs to give birth and raise their puppies until their eyes and ears open around 2-3 weeks old. There's a wide range of whelping box options from cheap and disposable to stylish and reusable. [READ Ultimate Whelping Box Guide](#)
 - Large enough for mom to fully stretch out, move around and get in and out of easily
 - Bumper rail (or pig rail) that goes around the inside of pen. This prevents mom from accidentally smushing a puppy against the side
 - Solid sides to prevent drafts and provide privacy. If using a wire pen, cover the walls with sheets or blankets
 - Easy to clean and sanitize with a waterproof floor. Whelping is messy and the fluids will permanently stain blankets, carpet, floors, etc. Just before labor begins, remove all bedding (puppies can become lost and smushed in loose materials) and lay down large potty pads or hospital pads. As they become soiled, remove and replace or lay fresh on top
- Temperature in the room should be around 75°F/24°C with no drafts. It may be tempting to provide supplemental heat, but do so very carefully. If using a heating pad or heat lamp be sure it is carefully secured in place, there are no accessible wires and that mom and puppies can easily move away from the heat source. Too hot is just as dangerous as too cold
- Restrict mom to the whelping area as she may choose a less desirable location to give birth (you don't want her hiding under your bed or porch)
- Do not allow any other animals in the whelping room. Some mom dogs will tolerate human onlookers. Ask guests to be fairly quiet and still. If mom seems stressed, ask guests to leave



Take Notes

Good notes are invaluable to your veterinarian in case of an emergency. Note the date and time of the following whelping events ([see Whelping Log at the end](#))

- Temperature drops ([see How to Take a Rectal Temperature at the end](#))
- Nesting begins
- Appetite diminishes
- Panting starts
- Abdominal straining observed
- When each puppy first appears in birth canal
- When each puppy is fully out of birth canal

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Whelping Kit

- Several clean, dry terry-cloth hand towels and washcloths
- Bulb syringe
- Pair of straight, blunt-tipped surgical scissors
- Unwaxed dental floss
- Small gauze pads (10-20)
- Water-soluble lubricating jelly
- Povidone iodine solution (not scrub soap). Pour an ounce into widemouthed glass vessel such as baby food jar or shot glass
- Clock with second hand
- Baby scale
- Nitrile gloves
- Several large potty pads or hospital pads
- Optional
 - ID collars
 - 3-4 pairs of boiled hemostat forceps (instead of dental floss). To sterilize, boil in covered pan for 15 minutes. Pour off water and let them dry and cool in pan until needed

Shave and a Hair Cut

If mom has long fur, it will help everyone stay much cleaner if you shave or trim the fur on her back legs and around her nipples.

Ask for Help

Some vets and animal rescues will offer to take emergency calls, even in the middle of the night. Ask if this is an option. Be sure to get their daytime and after hours contact information and record it in the [Whelping Log](#) below.

How to Predict When Whelping Will Occur

Predicting the exact date can be difficult, especially if you don't know when she mated. The average dog pregnancy lasts about 63 days.

X-Rays

Having an X-ray taken of mom is one way to get an idea of how many puppies are expected. However:

- The trip to the vet may cause too much stress for mom
- They expose the fetuses to radiation
- They may not provide an accurate count (one puppy can visually obscure another)
- They are not cheap



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Signs of Labor

Signs of labor are not constant or predictable, she may exhibit some, all or none. Several days before delivery you may observe

- Decrease in appetite
- Restless and sedentary
- Nesting and digging at bedding
- Panting
- Belly will sag
- Mammary glands enlarge
- Vulva becomes flaccid and pendulous
- Abdominal straining
- A sure sign is the presence of a green/black/reddish brown vaginal discharge (lochia) seen several hours before first puppy and may continue several days after birth (if it has a strong odor, call your vet)
- About 12-24 hours before birth, her body temperature will drop from a **normal 101.5°F/38.6°C to around 99°F/37.2°C or 98°F/36.7°C** ([see How to Take a Rectal Temperature at the end](#))



What to Expect During Whelping

Stage I Labor

- Period of more intense nesting and abdominal contractions
- Panting, pacing, whining, demanding attention, nervous, uncomfortable, licking genitals
- Appearance of the mucus plug a clear, odorless, stringy vaginal discharge (like raw egg white)

Stage II Labor

- Productive labor begins, mom lies on her side and begins to strain
- More clear, straw-colored or light pink fluid leaks from the birth canal
- Uterine contractions intensify and abdominal muscular contractions are apparent
- Puppies often appear as a bubble b/c they are encased in the amniotic sac. Mom will lick and tear at sac. Sometimes the sac will break before the puppy is born
- The entire placenta usually follows each puppy and remains attached via the umbilical cord
- She will continue to lick, clean and roll puppy, chew through umbilical cord and usually eat the placenta (after birth). She may vomit some later. This is all normal
 - We recommend that you allow her to eat the placentas but she does not need to eat *all* of them, especially if she has a large litter. Eating too many can cause digestive issues
- Typically, 10-60 minutes between puppies
- Most deliveries take 4-6 hours total, but can vary



Green or black fluids can be normal as long as they don't smell bad

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- Time between 1st and 2nd puppies is often longer than interval between later deliveries. Often delivered in pairs in quick succession (one from each uterine horn)
- Hard to know when she is done delivering. If contractions have stopped and she is resting calmly, she is probably done



Immediately after birth, Mom should start licking, tearing and eating the amniotic sac and placenta. It's natural, probably necessary and gross.



Mom eating the placenta



It can look like things have gone terribly wrong but wait until Mom has finished cleaning before you panic (unless you can see the source of blood is coming from the puppy, then apply pressure and call a vet immediately)

Normal variations

- Mom may become reclusive
- May not lose her appetite
- May try to escape from the house and hide
- May delay delivery until she is alone
- Some puppies are born still inside the amniotic sac, and some are not
- 40% of puppies are born tail and hind feet first rather than head first. This can be a problem if the tail is visible but not the hind legs (breech birth, [see EMERGENCY #4](#))



Examine each puppy

Healthy puppies will be active, noisy and should be trying to nurse almost immediately. Puppies are born with their eyes and ears closed. **Never try to open them!** In the [Whelping Log](#) record:

- When each puppy first appears in birth canal
- When each puppy is fully out of birth canal
- Sex
- ID/Markings (e.g. black spots, white tail, etc.)
- Birth Position (born head, hind feet or butt (breech) first)
- Weight
- Whether or not you observed the placenta
- Whether or not you observed the puppy nursing
- Whether or not the puppy has a cleft palate (see below)



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Nursing, Colostrum and Maternal Antibodies

Colostrum is the mother's 'first milk' and is slightly thicker and darker than regular milk. It is a nutrient-dense milk that contains high levels of antibodies which help provide immunity to the puppies. However, a puppy's gut is only able to absorb these whole, undigested antibodies for the first 4-12 hours of life. After that, the puppy's gut 'closes' and can no longer absorb the antibodies without breaking them down first – they will still receive nutrition but not immunity. This is why it is so important to observe that each puppy has nursed shortly after birth.



Checking for a Cleft Palate

A cleft palate occurs when tissues in the mouth do not fuse and come together during embryonic development. A primary cleft palate occurs in the lip or nose and typically does not affect the puppy's health or require surgery. A secondary cleft palate occurs in the hard, bony section of the roof of the mouth. This leaves a gap between the mouth and nasal cavity making it difficult for the puppy to properly nurse. Often, these puppies will need to be tube fed until they are old enough for surgery. To check for a cleft palate, open the puppy's mouth and look for an opening in the roof of its mouth. If you find one, contact your veterinarian immediately as these puppies will have a difficult time nursing and gaining weight.

When to Intervene: Non-Emergencies

NON-EMERGENCY #1: Mom does not remove amniotic sac from around puppy's head within 1 minute of birth

This is the most common type of intervention. Fortunately, it's a quick, easy fix that can prevent an actual emergency.

- Use a hand towel or your fingers to gently break amniotic sac from around puppy's head so they can breathe without aspirating (inhaling) fluids
- Use a bulb syringe to gently remove fluids from each nostril and mouth
- If puppy is breathing, place puppy under mom's chin
- If puppy is not breathing, [go to EMERGENCY #3](#)



USE A BULB SYRINGE TO SUCK FLUIDS FROM EACH NOSTRIL AND MOUTH



LISTEN FOR BREATH SOUNDS

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NON-EMERGENCY #2: Mom is chewing through the umbilical cord and pulling too hard on the half that is still connected to the puppy

Sometimes moms are over-zealous when they chew through the cord and pull on the puppy. This could cause serious injury to the puppy.

- If mom will allow, grasp the cord about 1in/2.5cm from the puppy and hold it firmly while she chews the cord
- It is slippery so you might need to use a piece of gauze or a wash cloth to hold the cord
- It's not unusual for there to be a little blood coming from the cord. If there is a lot, call your vet
- If puppy is breathing, place puppy under mom's chin
- If puppy is not breathing, [go to EMERGENCY #3](#)

When to Call for Help: Emergencies

Once the placenta detaches from the uterine wall, the puppy is no longer receiving oxygen from its mother. There is still oxygen left in their blood stream but the clock is ticking. When and if labor does not proceed normally, this lack of oxygen is typically what you are working against.

This section may seem very scary but don't stress. Most births occur without incident. Problems are more likely to occur in certain breeds (brachycephalic/flat-nosed and toy breeds), very young and very old mothers. Just take a deep breath and do the best you can. You got this!

When to call for help

- No puppies produced w/in 24 hours of temperature dropping
- More than 1 hour of Stage II Labor without the delivery of first puppy
- More than 4 hours between puppies and more are expected
- Breech birth, only tail visible, no hind legs [see EMERGENCY #4](#)
- If labor stops abruptly (ask bystanders to leave)
- If a puppy's nose is visible at the vulva and no progress is made for 10-15 minutes
- If black, thick, odorous fluid is seen before birth of first puppy or at any time during birthing
- If thick, yellow, foul discharge is seen during birth (dark green fluids are normal)
- If mom seems depressed, disoriented, vomits, wretches, acts weak or staggers when walking

EMERGENCY #1: Puppy is half in and half out of birth canal (head first) for more than 3 minutes

- Call for help (or have another person do so if they are available) and begin the steps below immediately. **Proceed urgently but calmly**
- Use a hand towel or your fingers to break amniotic sac from around puppy's head
- If mom is no longer pushing, grasp puppy behind its shoulders (not the head) and apply slow, gentle traction downward (parallel to mom's hind legs).

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- If forelegs are not alongside head and are folded back along body so that you cannot get your fingers behind the puppy's shoulders, insert a well lubricated finger into the vagina to gently ease out the forelegs, one at a time.
- Once puppy is out, grasp umbilical cord with towel and apply slow, gentle traction to pull out the placental sac. **NEVER USE THE PUPPY AS A HANDLE.** This could eviscerate the puppy.
- Place puppy in front of mom. If she totally ignores it, open puppy's mouth and use a bulb syringe to suck fluids from each nostril and mouth, wipe membranes from its body and gently massage chest to stimulate breathing.
- As soon as it is breathing on its own, place it under mom's chin. Leave placenta attached.
- If the puppy is not breathing, [go to EMERGENCY #3](#)

EMERGENCY #2: Mom does not chew through umbilical cord after several minutes

- Call for help (or have another person do so if they are available) if you need help with the steps below
- Clamp 2 hemostat forceps (or tie 2 lengths of dental floss) about 0.5in/1.3cm apart on the umbilical cord, at least 1in/2.5cm from the puppy (further from puppy is better than closer). If using floss, cut the ends of the tied floss close to the knot
- Cut the cord between the forceps or floss
- Dip the puppy's end of the cord in the bottle of iodine
- Set a timer to remove forceps in 10 minutes. Floss will fall off with cord
- If puppy is **squirming and crying**, place puppy under mom's chin with forceps or floss attached
- If puppy is **not squirming and crying**, [go to EMERGENCY #3](#)

EMERGENCY #3: Puppy appears lifeless and there are no signs of breathing or heartbeat

You will use a combination of suction to remove fluids from airways, rescue breaths to stimulate breathing, chest compression to stimulate heartbeat and gentle but vigorous rubbing to stimulate all systems.

- Call for help (or have another person do so if they are available) *and* begin the steps below immediately. Proceed urgently but calmly

STEP #1: Cut umbilical cord

- If the puppy is still attached to the placenta via the umbilical cord, [go to EMERGENCY #2](#)

STEP #2: Clear airway

- Hold puppy on its back in your palm over a surface (in case it squirms)
- Lower puppy's head to allow gravity to help drain fluids
- Suck fluids from each nostril and mouth with bulb syringe
- Wipe membrane and fluids off face with a towel

STEP #3: Check that airway is clear

- Blow small amount of air into lungs 3 times to test if you can get air into the lungs

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- Use your mouth to cover the puppy's nose and mouth. Gently blow a small amount of air (**DON'T OVERINFLATE LUNGS! Their lungs are very small, too much air could damage them**).
- You should see their belly/chest inflate with good rise and fall
 - **NOTE:** It is possible for humans to contract certain diseases (Brucellosis) from an infected puppy with this type of contact
 - Alternatively, you can blow into the puppy's open mouth from a few inches/centimeters away or create a 'tube' with your hand(s) to blow through which keeps your mouth from touching the puppy.
- If the belly/chest does not inflate, there may still be an obstruction. **Return to STEP #2**
- Rub puppy gently but vigorously all over its body for 20-30 seconds
- Listen for breath sounds or look to see if belly/chest are rising and falling on their own
 - If puppy **is breathing**, continue to rub the puppy gently but vigorously all over until it is squirming and crying. Then place it under mom's chin
 - If puppy **is not breathing**, go to STEP #4

STEP #4: Check for heartbeat

- Place two fingers on the puppy's chest or use a stethoscope to feel/listen for a heartbeat
 - If there **is no heartbeat**, go to STEP #6
 - If there **is a heartbeat but no breathing**, repeat STEP #5
 - If there **is a heartbeat and breathing**, rub puppy gently but vigorously until it is squirming and crying. Then place it under mom's chin

STEP #5: Administer rescue breaths

- Suck fluids from each nostril and mouth with bulb syringe
- Blow small amount of air into lungs 3 times (**see STEP #3 for directions**)
- Rub puppy gently but vigorously all over its body for 20-30 seconds
- Repeat 3 rounds of suck, blow and rub
- Check for breathing and heartbeat
 - If there **is no heartbeat**, go to STEP #6
 - If there **is a heartbeat but no breathing**, repeat STEP #5
 - If there **is a heartbeat and breathing**, rub puppy gently but vigorously until it is squirming and crying. Then place it under mom's chin
- Don't give up for at least 20 minutes

STEP #6: Administer chest compressions and rescue breaths

- Suck fluids from each nostril and mouth with bulb syringe
- Press down gently but rapidly with two fingers on the puppy's chest, just behind front legs, 20-40 presses in 20 seconds
- Blow small amount of air into lungs 3 times (**see STEP #3 for directions**)
- Rub puppy gently but vigorously all over its body for 20-30 seconds
- Repeat 3 rounds of suck, press, blow and rub
- Check for breathing and heartbeat
 - If there is no heartbeat, repeat STEP #6

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- If there is a heartbeat but no breathing, **go to [STEP #5](#)**
- If there **is a heartbeat and breathing**, rub puppy gently but vigorously until it is squirming and crying. Then place it under mom's chin
- Don't give up for at least 20 minutes

EMERGENCY #4: Puppy emerges from birth canal tail/butt first and delivery does not proceed for 5 minutes (Breech Birth)

Call for help (or have another person do so if they are available) as this is a somewhat difficult procedure. If help is not available, proceed urgently but calmly to the steps below

- Grasp puppy around hips (never by the tail) and apply gentle, downward traction parallel to mom's hind legs
- If you can't grasp the puppy's hips because its hind legs are folded in alongside its body, insert a well lubricated finger into the vagina and gently, slowly ease out each leg. It's easy to damage tissues so proceed carefully and under professional instruction, when possible
- Once puppy is out, grasp umbilical cord with towel and apply slow, gentle traction to pull out the placental sac. **NEVER USE THE PUPPY AS A HANDLE.** This could eviscerate the puppy.
- Place puppy in front of mom. If she totally ignores it, open puppy's mouth and use a bulb syringe to suck fluids from each nostril and mouth, wipe membranes from its body and gently massage chest to stimulate breathing.
- As soon as it is breathing on its own, place it under mom's chin. Leave placenta attached.
- If the puppy is not breathing, **[go to EMERGENCY #3](#)**

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Temperature Log

About 1-2 weeks before delivery, record mom's temperature 1-3x per day at same time(s) each day. About 12-24 hours before birth, temperature will drop from a normal **101.5°F/38.6°C to around 99°F/37.2°C or 98°F/36.7°C.**

Date	AM Temp	Mid Temp	PM Temp

Date	AM Temp	Mid Temp	PM Temp

How to Take a Rectal Temperature

Most dogs do not enjoy having their temperature taken rectally but it is the most reliable method.

Supplies

- Baby rectal thermometer
- Nitrile gloves
- Lubricating jelly
- Paper towel
- Cotton balls (2)
- Rubbing alcohol

Directions

- Put on gloves, apply alcohol to both balls and use one to disinfect thermometer
- Apply a generous amount of lubricant to the end of the thermometer
- You may need to restrain the dog either by laying her down against a wall with her rear towards your dominant hand or having a 2nd person hold her
 - To keep her busy, try a food stuffed toy, frozen treat or 2nd person feeding her treats
- Place your thumb and forefinger 1in/2.5cm from the end of the thermometer. This will keep the thermometer at the correct depth while inserted and prevent it from moving around
- You may need to place your other hand on dog's shoulder to prevent her from getting up
- Insert thermometer into her rectum 1in/2.5cm (up to depth stop created by your fingers)
- Remove thermometer once it indicates a temperature has been taken (1-2 minutes)
- Use the paper towel to wipe off excess lubricant
- Use 2nd alcohol-soaked cotton ball to disinfect thermometer
- Remove gloves and record temperature

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Whelping Log

Mom's Name _____ Today's Date (DOB) _____

Emergency Contact Name _____

Emergency Phone _____

Emergency Phone After Hours _____

Behavior	Date	Time	Behavior	Date	Time
Nesting begins			Panting beings		
Appetite diminishes			Abdominal straining begins		
Temperature drops					

	Time 1 st visible in birth canal	Time fully out of birth canal	ID/Markings	Sex	Birth Position (head, feet or butt 1st)	Birth Weight	Placenta Observed	Nursing Observed	Cleft Palate?	Notes
1				M / F			Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
2				M / F			Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
3				M / F			Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
4				M / F			Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
5				M / F			Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
6				M / F			Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
7				M / F			Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
8				M / F			Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
9				M / F			Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
10				M / F			Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
11				M / F			Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
12				M / F			Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	