

Does Your Dog Need a C-Section?

When whelping doesn't go as planned, a Caesarean section may be necessary.

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Should she be taking so long? Straining so hard? Yelping so much? Just falling asleep? Could she need a Caesarean section?

There's no one reason a dog might need a C-section, but there is one rule: the sooner you realize you have a problem and your dam-to-be might require a C-section, the better the odds that all will go well. Look out for the following situations, which indicate she may need veterinary help.

Abnormal vaginal discharge

Hannah, a Saluki, developed a greenish-yellow discharge on day 62 of her pregnancy. At no time prior to whelping is it normal to have a yellowish-colored discharge, which can indicate an infection, or a bloody or black discharge, which can indicate bleeding or a dead fetus. X-rays and blood work can narrow down the cause of abnormal discharge.

Hannah's owner, Patsy Hoy of Creamery, Pa., rushed her to the veterinarian for an emergency C-section. Three of the fetuses had died and another died shortly after birth, but the C-section saved the remaining puppy, and very likely, Hannah.

Past due date

An X-ray showed that Fancy, a Doberman Pinscher owned by Joni Thomson of St. Cloud, Fla., was pregnant with only one puppy. Her due date came and went, but nothing happened. Thomson hadn't done progesterone testing when Fancy was bred, so she didn't know the exact day of ovulation, which meant she didn't know the exact day she should whelp.

Measuring blood levels of progesterone, a female hormone that starts to rise just before ovulation, can give an idea of whether whelping is imminent because the levels fall immediately beforehand. The decline is set off by hormones secreted by the fetuses, but when there's only one puppy, it may not secrete enough hormones to start the process. A further problem is that singleton puppies are often very large, making delivery difficult.

With progesterone testing, Fancy's owner would have known that by 65 days post-ovulation, the puppy was definitely overdue. Without it, 72 days post-breeding would definitely be too long. In Fancy's case, a C-section on day 69 resulted in one extremely large and mature puppy.

Stage 1 labor for more than 12 hours

Stage 1 labor is the start of the labor process, during which the dam usually becomes restless, and may pant, dig and vomit as her cervix dilates.

Miniature Poodle Lolly, owned by Valerie Stanol of Anza, Calif., started to show signs of restlessness, but never progressed to digging until almost two days later. Another day passed before she gave her first push. Then she quit. Another 12 hours passed, with no pushing. An X-ray showed she had nine puppies, probably more than she could deliver on her own, even if she got started. A C-section was performed, and eight of the nine puppies were delivered alive.

Stage 2 labor for more than four hours with intermittent labor

Windy, a German Shorthaired Pointer owned by Jinnie Strickland of El Paso, Texas, was in stage 2 labor (forcefully straining with obvious contractions) for four hours, but never produced a puppy. Normally, when the first pup's head enters the cervix, it stimulates coordinated uterine contractions. These contractions may be mild, especially if the fetus isn't pressing firmly against the cervix.

Windy's dam had a history of uterine inertia, in which the contractions are not strong enough to deliver a puppy, so once the veterinarian made sure a puppy wasn't blocking the canal, he gave her an injection of oxytocin, a drug that stimulates uterine contractions. Giving oxytocin if the problem is an obstruction could kill a puppy stuck in the canal or seriously injure the dam.

When Windy still didn't respond, a C-section revealed the first puppy was dead, but two puppies survived.

Stage 2 labor with forceful, continuous contractions for more than 30 minutes

Katie Souder's Dachshund, Kassi, was straining to deliver a puppy for 45 minutes. X-rays indicated that the three puppies' skulls were small enough to pass through her pelvis. Because her contractions were forceful, Kassi was not given oxytocin and had a C-section instead. In fact, a puppy was stuck in the birth canal. X-rays had not shown that this puppy, which was dead, was huge and swollen, probably a so-called "water puppy" (a puppy whose tissue and organs are pumped up with fluid, and is thus very large). The other two puppies survived to return to Souder's Cocoa, Fla., home.

Wrongly positioned fetuses

Chloe, an Australian Shepherd, was straining, but no puppy emerged. Her owner, Brent Flinchum of Live Oak, Fla., could feel just one leg of the puppy in the canal. The normal birthing position is nose and front feet first, or tail and hind feet first. If the limbs are bent back, the head is bent back or to the side, or the pup is sideways, it can cause problems.

Flinchum, and then her vet, tried to manipulate the puppy into position – a difficult effort. A C-section was the only way to save that puppy, as well as Chloe and the rest of the litter.

More puppies to come

Basset Hound Milly, owned by Karon Butler of Miramar, Fla., delivered six puppies naturally, then quit. X-rays showed two more puppies. Especially with large litters, dams can become exhausted and suffer from uterine inertia. If there's no sign of obstruction, oxytocin may help. However, if there are several more puppies, oxytocin probably won't help the bitch deliver them all before she absolutely gives out. The best bet is to perform a C-section before she's exhausted.

In Milly's case, the vet gave three shots of oxytocin, which resulted in the birth of one more pup. Because studies show that after three shots the receptor sites are loaded and additional shots don't work, they did a C-section and delivered two more healthy puppies.

Breeds known to need C-sections

French Bulldog Flutter was nearing her due date. Breeds with big heads and narrow pelvic regions, such as the Frenchie, Pekingese and Bulldog, often have difficulty delivering naturally. In these cases, it's far safer to perform a scheduled C-section before the dam is in trouble. Flutter's owner, Delores Nead of Suffolk, Va., planned for this by measuring her progesterone levels during breeding so they'd know her exact due date. They went to the clinic at the appointed time and her regular veterinarian performed the C-section, delivering two healthy puppies.

Pre-whelping exams

Schedule a pre-whelping exam and talk to your veterinarian before the due date. Discuss what to do if your dam shows signs of trouble after regular clinic hours. It's always safer to get a C-section early rather than late, so don't be shy about calling if she's not progressing as you think she should. C-sections are far less risky than difficult births, but the longer you wait, the riskier both become. In the end it could be the kindest – and safest – option.

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