

How Much for That Dog Litter?

A realistic look at breeding expenses.

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If you search the Internet for “puppy-breeding expenses,” you’ll wonder how anyone who isn’t a millionaire can afford to raise a litter. Breeding can be expensive. As with any endeavor, you need to consider the costs versus compensation before you commit yourself.

It’s impossible to predict the true cost of a litter. Expenses vary depending on the size, breed and health of your dog; the region in which you live; and what you’re trying to achieve with the litter. However, it’s possible to provide a template that allows you to estimate your own cost range.

Consider your goals

Do you want to breed competition-quality dogs, for conformation or performance? If so, a major expense will be obtaining a competition- or near-competition-quality female, and competing with her so she proves herself by earning wins or titles. First, figure out the price range of such a female, and the average cost to finish a title. You may already own a titled bitch, and if so, it’s up to you whether to add those costs into your equation. If you don’t own one, you may be able to lease a female (pay the bitch’s owner in exchange for breeding a litter in your name); those costs must be included as direct expenses.

Health testing

Health testing for prevalent hereditary problems in your breed should be mandatory. Consult your breed’s parent club health committee for a list of suggested tests, or visit www.caninehealthinfo.org for a list of tests suggested by the various breed parent clubs. Then contact your veterinarian or the suggested testing establishment for test costs and add them into your litter expense.

Stud dog

The choice of stud dog will also depend on your goals. You may get away with choosing the dog down the street if you just want to breed companions, but if you want to breed competition-quality dogs, you’ll need to use a well-known stud dog that has either proven himself as a winner or as a sire of winners. Such a stud will entail a higher stud fee, and possibly, travel. Any stud dog should have the same health tests as the bitch. Find out the range of stud fees in your breed.

Breeding costs

The cost of breeding may be a consideration. Your female should have a pre-breeding examination, along with a brucellosis test. Ask your veterinarian for a rough cost estimate. For critical breedings, you may choose to run progesterone tests so that you can pinpoint ovulation; depending on how many tests you run, this can end up costing hundreds of dollars.

Shipping and travel expenses

If the stud is local and natural breeding is possible, then the breeding expense is negligible. But if he’s not local, you must consider the possible costs of shipping your bitch to him and paying board; or taking her there yourself and paying for a motel; or having semen chilled and flown to you so you can inseminate your female. For large dogs, chilled semen may be cheaper, but you’ll absolutely need to run progesterone tests for it to be successful.

Artificial insemination

In some breeds, natural breedings are next to impossible, so you’ll need to figure the expense of artificial insemination (AI). Traditional AIs are not terribly expensive, but if you do them every other day, as you would normally do with a natural breeding to increase the chance of not missing ovulation, the costs can add up. Even in breeds that breed easily, sometimes the deed simply can’t be consummated and an AI is necessary.

Gestation expenses

During the second half of pregnancy, you’ll change the dam’s food to a puppy formula, and perhaps feed a little more of it, but this added cost, in the scheme of things, is negligible. However, if you opt for a hormone test, ultrasound or even palpation to confirm the pregnancy, this added expense will probably be between \$50 and \$100. A radiograph in the week

preceding birth to determine the number and positions of puppies is a good idea, but not strictly necessary in most dogs. It adds another bill of \$50 to \$100.

C-section

If your breed is one that often needs a Caesarean section, plan on one and schedule it. Scheduling will mean you need to run progesterone tests during estrus to pinpoint ovulation, and thus the whelping date, but even so it will be less expensive than an emergency C-section. No matter what your breed, don't plan a litter unless you can afford a possible C-section. Similarly, if the dam has post-whelping problems, such as eclampsia, you may incur a large veterinary bill.

Whelping box

Your whelping box may be as simple as a child's plastic wading pool or as professional as one you can buy with pig rails (rails or bars attached to the box walls that allow a puppy to get beneath them, protecting it in case the dam squeezes it between herself and the wall). The latter type can cost hundreds of dollars, but can save your puppies' lives, especially if you are dealing with a giant breed. Find out if your breed is one that is apt to smother puppies by lying on them. If so, you must build or buy a box with rails.

Whelping supplies

Gather your whelping supplies. I strongly suggest a how-to book on the subject, which can range from a free library copy to a new \$30 copy. You should also have a small warming box, a heating pad, many thin washcloths, several disposable incontinence pads, a bulb syringe, dental floss, antiseptic solution and hemostats.

Emergency supplies

Gather your newborn-puppy-care supplies. If all goes well, you won't need them. But you need enough to get you through the night or weekend just in case. They include baby scales, puppy-milk substitute, a feeding tube, a syringe and a rectal thermometer, as well as additional optional supplies.

Puppy food

While the puppies are nursing, you'll be feeding the dam a lot of puppy food; after they are weaned, they will be eating a lot of puppy food. Ask people in your breed the typical cost of feeding a litter to 8 weeks of age.

Health checkups

The puppies and dam should be checked by a veterinarian soon after birth. If you plan to dock tails or remove dewclaws, this must be performed by a vet. The expense per puppy is not usually high, but it adds up for a whole litter. The same is true for deworming medication and vaccinations. Find out now how much your veterinarian charges per puppy, and how many times you should worm them by 8 weeks. Also consider that your puppies could contract other parasites, such as Coccidia, and require treatment. If your breed is one in which puppy health testing for hereditary problems is possible, add that expense.

Enclosures

After whelping, where will you raise the puppies? You'll probably want an exercise pen inside the house and a fenced area outside.

Missed work

Your time should be factored in because it can translate to actual financial loss in case you have to take time off work, or if staying up all night has you so exhausted you can't do your real job effectively. Make sure you can take at least a week off work in the event of an emergency. Plan on working hard caring for and cleaning up after the puppies. Also factor in the time it takes to bring the pups to the veterinarian, field inquiries from potential buyers and answer questions from new puppy owners.

Do the math

Find out what the average litter size is for your breed, and the range of prices for puppies of similar quality and health-tested background as yours. Compare it to the range of costs you've figured. At what point do you break even? Can you afford the litter even if you don't break even? Most states require a veterinary health certificate when you sell a puppy, and many collect sales taxes. Find out how those affect your costs before deciding on price.

The miracle of life

These calculations don't take into consideration the intangibles, of course: the new lives created and the joy the puppies bring to you and their new families. Just make sure you don't go broke in the process!

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