

Raising Puppy Litters Great and Small

Singleton and gargantuan litters each present a distinct set of needs and challenges to breeder, dam, and puppies.

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Waiting patiently with my Puli bitch while she was in labor with her last litter, I thought she'd have perhaps three or four puppies since she was not really large. Her previous litter had been six; average for Pulik is four or five. She produced one baby boy; I waited for more, but none arrived. William, as he was named, was her litter.

A singleton litter is usually somewhat of a disappointment to a breeder, although they are quite common in the Toy breeds. Many breeders will have an ultrasound or X-ray done to get an idea of the number of puppies to expect. If there are only one or two puppies, they have plenty of room to grow and can become larger than normal. The bitch may not be able to deliver without assistance; in such cases, a breeder might want to discuss a C-section with his vet.

Very small litters may also fail to exert enough influence in the bitch to start labor, so a breeder who knows that only one or two puppies are on the way should keep a very close eye on her, especially if her expected date passes with no sign of labor starting. These are the times when a breeder very much in tune with her dogs can get a gut feeling that all is not well, and if she has a vet who respects those feelings, a litter may be saved by a C-section or some other measure.

Newborn puppies need warmth, and a singleton puppy has no siblings to join him in a nice, cozy pile. A good and loving dam will stay with him and he can snuggle into her, but she cannot be there every second. She'll need potty breaks, meal breaks, and she may just decide that she doesn't need to be there round the clock. A warming pad or heat lamp will keep the pup comfortable when she's gone. A few stuffed toys added to the whelping box can simulate a pile of siblings as well. We gave William a teddy bear, dubbed "William's brother," and he would lie happily draped across it while his dam was away taking care of other business.

Issues for Singletons and DamsThe occasional dam may become overly attentive to a litter of only one or two babies; she may lick them obsessively and cause skin damage. Breeders should try to stop this, distracting her as much as possible, reassuring her that she is doing fine. Such dams usually calm down and relax after a few days.

A single puppy, or even two puppies, sometimes does not stimulate milk flow in all nipples as well as a normal-sized litter would. It's important to try to rotate the puppy through all the nipples to avoid swollen breasts and the possible onset of mastitis in the dam.