

The Facts About Rearing Dogs Holistically

When it comes to breeding and puppy care, separate holistic facts from fiction.

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Dogs have been having puppies the natural way for thousands of years, yet modern breeders are increasingly turning to new ways of helping nature along, whether by taking advantage of modern chemistry or traditional herbs. But which, if any, natural therapies are actually proven helpful in a variety of situations?

Q: My breeder advocates giving my bitch red raspberry leaves so she will whelp more easily. Is that good advice?

A: No. Although popular with many breeders, no evidence exists that red raspberry leaves are in any way beneficial to pregnant dogs. In fact, the opposite may be true. Karen Copley RNC BSN, of WhelpWise, a company specializing in canine fetal monitoring, found much higher fetal mortality rate (33 percent) in bitches given this supplement as opposed to those not given it (5 to 7 percent). Red raspberry causes the uterus to contract; breeders use it because they believe it aids in strengthening uterine contractions during whelping. The problem, in part, is that by increasing contractions during implantations, the eggs may be expelled from the uterus, or they may then have more difficulty implanting firmly, possibly decreasing nourishment or increasing the chance of becoming detached too early. Contractions during labor can be too strong or prolonged, restricting the blood and oxygen supply the puppy normally gets between contractions. Simply because red raspberry leaves are natural does not make them safe.

Q: What herbal remedies are helpful for pregnant dogs?

A: Dog breeders have a long history of turning to the same herbal remedies that pregnant women use. For example, besides red raspberry leaves, chaste berry, goldenseal, juniper berry, mistletoe, mugwort, pennyroyal oil, rue, scotch broom and tansy have all been put forth as aids to increase uterine contractions. But no data exists for dogs as to whether they are effective, and if so, what doses are safe. And as previously stated, increasing uterine contractions is not always a good thing. Other herbal supplements include blue cohosh and black cohosh to stimulate labor, viburnum opulis to prevent miscarriage, caulophyllum to maintain pregnancy, arnica in the final week of pregnancy to reduce tissue damage during whelping, and sepia after whelping to help the uterus return to normal. Unfortunately, none of these claims are supported by data, and no dose curves have been established for dogs. In general, if you want to breed naturally, then you may be safer to be truly natural and leave your bitch alone when it comes to supplements.

Q: We neglected to worm or vaccinate our bitch before breeding her. Is it safe to give her nosodes and natural wormers now that she's pregnant?

A: While it's probably safe to give her nosodes (a homeopathic remedy prepared from diseased tissue or products) it's also probably ineffective. If your bitch has been vaccinated within the past three years or so, she's probably sufficiently immunized to provide good immunization to the puppies. Discuss her vaccination status with your veterinarian. As for worms, remember that even diligent worming won't remove certain worms that can lie dormant until activated by the hormones of pregnancy. Worming the bitch late in gestation can prevent them from infecting the puppies before they are born. Ask your veterinarian which wormers are safe.

Q: What drugs and natural products are safe to give pregnant bitches?

A: Before giving any drug or supplement, ask your veterinarian or look for the product's recommendation. Some chemicals don't cross the placenta, some cross the placenta but don't affect the fetus, and some cause very specific abnormalities to the fetus. Just because a product is natural, doesn't mean it can't also cross the placenta or affect the fetus. If studies have not been performed with pregnant dogs, don't give your bitch that product, natural or not.

Q: My bitch has false pregnancies. What natural remedies can I give her to make her stop?

A: Following her season, every bitch – whether pregnant or not – goes through the decrease in progesterone and rise in prolactin as though she were actually pregnant. Some simply exhibit the outward signs (mammary enlargement, milk production, nesting, maternal behavior) these changes cause more than others. The best natural remedy is to wrap her body, including the mammary area, with an elastic bandage and to cut her food and water in half for a day. Some hormonal therapies are available that either add progesterone back (megestrol acetate) or that add male androgens, but neither is particularly effective. Prolactin inhibitors can decrease milk production but are not perfect solutions. No herbal supplements have been shown to be effective, although skullcap and valerian tablets have been suggested.

Q: We had a puppy that was not breathing even though its lungs appeared to be clear of fluid and its heart was beating. My friend stuck a tiny needle in the tip of his nose between his nostrils. The puppy started breathing! What was this?

A: Your friend used the Jen Chung acupuncture site, gently twisting a fine (25-gauge) needle right between the nostrils until it touched bone. This can cause reflexive breathing.

Q: I have orphan puppies. Fortunately, my neighbor raises goats, and claims goat milk is ideal for puppies. Is this true?

A: No. Dog milk is much higher in protein and fat, and lower in lactose, than are goat or cow milk. You need to either find a surrogate dam who is already nursing her own litter, or buy puppy-milk replacement formulated to meet the requirements of puppies.

Q: My bitch failed to conceive when she was bred last time. I've heard that giving her thyroid supplementation may help next time. What else can I try?

A: Low thyroid levels get the blame for a host of problems in dogs, sometimes rightly so. In fact, low thyroid can cause bitches to fail to come in season. If she does come in season, however, unless the thyroid level is virtually zero, studies show it does not seem to affect fertility or her ability to maintain a pregnancy. In most cases, failure to conceive can be blamed on mistimed breeding. You may wish to try progesterone testing next time to pinpoint ovulation. Relaxin testing and ultrasound can determine if it's a problem with maintaining pregnancy rather than conceiving. If that's the case, sometimes hormonal therapy can help.

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