

Keep Puppies from ‘Fading’ with Proper Management

By Susan Chaney

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Puppy fading. Virtually every breeder has heard the term. However, according to Michelle Kutzler, D.V.M., Ph.D., an associate professor in the department of animal sciences at Oregon State University, no puppy born healthy should die within the first two weeks of birth. If it does, it's a matter of animal management, not “fading,” she says.

A reproduction specialist and diplomate of the American College of Theriogenologists, Kutzler says “puppy fading” is a “horrible description of a combination of poor management techniques. There's no excuse for it. So, when you have puppies die and you don't want to figure out why they died or make the changes necessary to keep it from happening again, you give it a name like ‘fading puppy complex.’”

A good clue to a puppy in distress is crying. “Barring a birth defect, a trauma during birth or post-birth trauma, puppies shouldn't cry,” Kutzler says

Regardless of the cause of a puppy's distress, crying for more than a moment or two is a sign that there's a problem. “Hungry or thirsty or cold puppies will cry initially,” Kutzler says. Puppies with herpesvirus also cry because it's painful. Healthy puppies under 2 weeks of age, however, “give a peep here and there.” Neonates should either be suckling or sleeping. “If they're full and warm, they're asleep,” she says.

Nonresponsive Puppies Need Help

“Normally a puppy will adjust its skeletal muscles in response to being picked up,” Kutzler says. You should feel that difference. If you pick up a puppy, and it doesn't adjust, “that's a big clue that something's wrong.” Vigorously rubbing the puppy to warm it up, including its chest, will stimulate circulation. If the puppy starts making noise, it's working. “You want to make ‘em angry,” she says. “Those crying, angry puppies are breathing.”

Never try to feed a listless puppy.

Five minutes is all you should spend rubbing a listless puppy. After that, “you're on the way to the vet,” Kutzler says.

If it warms up and becomes responsive though, Kutzler suggests rubbing a little Karo syrup on its gums. The sugar can “wake them up from that stupor.” If the puppy can then suckle, it's improving. If not, it's time to get it to the vet. And it's extremely important to keep the puppy warm on the way there. One of the best ways to do this is to tuck the puppy into your bra, she says. “It's like a little puppy hammock.” You can drive safely, and the puppy stays toasty on the way.

Common causes of death in otherwise healthy puppies during the first two weeks of life include starvation, hypothermia and herpesvirus.

Puppies Must Eat

The top cause of neonate mortality is “starvation and dehydration,” Kutzler says. “They're using up all their carbohydrate reserves to nourish themselves. If they're not getting milk, they're dehydrating too.”

She recommends routinely putting lower birth weight puppies on the hind teats and bigger puppies to the front ones. The hind ones provide more milk than those to the front.

Breeders who weigh puppies at birth and consistently every 12 hours thereafter can easily tell if each puppy is getting enough to eat, she says. “Monitoring birth weight is one of the most important things a breeder can do.”

It's OK if a puppy weighs the same amount on Day 1 as on Day 0. However, if a puppy weighs less on Day 1 or the same amount or less on Day 2, it is not feeding well. The first thing to do is move that puppy to a hind teat. If hind-teat suckling doesn't put weight on a puppy, she recommends running a tube into the puppy's stomach to supplement. Every breeder should know how to run a feeding tube, Kutzler says.

Puppies Must Stay Warm

Hypothermia is a leading cause of death of these very young puppies. Neonates should have a rectal temperature of 95 to 99 degrees from birth to week one, 97 to 100 from weeks one to three, and a normal temperature for that particular breed after that point.

Starvation and dehydration contribute to hypothermia, but so does a whelping box that's not warm enough. Kutzler recommends keeping it between 86 and 90 degrees Fahrenheit – at puppy level – for the first week. For weeks two and three, maintain the temperature between 80 and 85 degrees. In week four, reduce the temperature to 70 to 75 degrees. These temperatures, described in Kutzler's book, "Small Animal Pediatrics," (Saunders Elsevier, 2010, \$93.95), assume average humidity. If the litter is in a bathroom, for example, temperatures should be lowered to compensate for humidity.

To measure whelping box temperature accurately, use a round-shaped thermometer that doesn't contain mercury and keep it right in the box at the puppies' level. A heat lamp in a corner gives the puppies a gradient of heat options. "Even newborns can move both toward and away from heat," Kutzler says. Often breeders use heating pads, but heat lamps work better, she says. If you must use a heating pad, ensure that some part of the box is away from the pad so puppies that get too warm can move away from it.

Herpesvirus Is a Real Threat

Unrelated to human herpes simplex virus, herpesvirus is passed from one dog to another via contact with bodily fluids or secretions. If puppies cry even though they are eating and warm, they may have the virus. Often, the puppies' skin will have tiny bruises, Kutzler says, about the size of a pin heads. "Herpesvirus attacks the blood vessels, making them leaky." The bruises are easy to see on puppies' tummies, in the white part of the eye or in the mucus membrane in the mouth.

Most often puppies get the virus from the dam during or after birth via secretions containing mucus.

Opinions vary as to whether neonates can survive herpesvirus, but Kutzler says that if they're kept warm enough right from birth, the virus can't spread in a neonate's body. Many dogs live with the virus, but never have symptoms.

Saving Your Puppies

A listless puppy is not something to take a wait-and-see attitude about. If its temperature is below 95 in the first week, it's too cold. If it's not suckling, something's wrong. If it's crying, it needs intervention from you, and possibly a veterinarian.

One of the most important things, Kutzler says, is to have a mentor if you're not experienced with whelping. "Find a dog breeder who has been doing this for a while. They're going to have made all the mistakes that you're going to make. They're going to be there for moral support." You may not be able to count on help from your vet. "Most vets are educated only in weaning forward," she says. "Most experienced dog breeders know more [about whelping and the early weeks] than most veterinarians."

Even with a mentor, don't let listless, non-suckling puppies continue in those states. "Don't use the syndrome as an excuse," Kutzler says. "Fading puppy syndrome is not like Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. The causes of it are numerous, but most of them can be prevented with proper management. It's really just animal care. Don't accept the loss of even one puppy."

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