

MODULE 2

The Final Week Before Whelping

Learning Objectives

At the completion of this module, the breeder should be able to:

- Recognize signs of impending labor.
- Prepare a safe whelping environment.
- Understand nutritional needs during late pregnancy.
- Implement biosecurity measures.
- Identify when labor is approaching.

The Importance of Preparation

The final week of pregnancy is often an emotional time for breeders. Excitement builds as the anticipated arrival of puppies approaches. However, preparation during this period can have a profound impact on the health and survival of both the dam and her puppies.

The breeder's goal during this week is simple:

Create an environment that allows the bitch to whelp naturally and safely while minimizing stress and disease exposure.

Late Pregnancy Nutrition

During most of pregnancy, the nutritional requirements of the bitch change very little.

The situation changes dramatically during the final three weeks.

Rapid fetal growth occurs during this period, and the bitch's caloric needs increase significantly.

A premium commercial growth or lactation diet should gradually replace the maintenance diet.

Important nutritional goals include:

- Adequate protein
- Adequate fat
- Appropriate calcium and phosphorus balance
- Increased caloric density

Supplementation with calcium should generally be avoided unless directed by a veterinarian.

Excess calcium supplementation may interfere with normal calcium regulation and can actually increase the risk of eclampsia after whelping.

Disease Prevention

One of the most overlooked aspects of late pregnancy management is disease control.

The bitch should not be exposed to unfamiliar dogs during the final three weeks of pregnancy or the first three weeks after delivery.

The primary concern is canine herpesvirus.

Adult dogs frequently show little or no illness when infected.

Newborn puppies are far more vulnerable.

Canine herpesvirus infection can result in:

- Stillbirths
- Neonatal death
- Entire litter losses

Isolation during this period is one of the simplest and most effective preventive measures.

Preparing the Whelping Area

The ideal whelping location should be:

- Quiet
- Draft free
- Easy to clean
- Comfortable
- Away from household traffic

The bitch should be introduced to the whelping box one to two weeks before her due date.

This allows her to develop positive associations with the area.

Many breeders make the mistake of introducing the box only when labor begins. The result is often a bitch that chooses a closet, couch, or bedroom instead.

Designing a Safe Whelping Box

The whelping box should be large enough for the bitch to lie comfortably on her side while nursing.

However, it should not be excessively large.

Pig rails are highly recommended.

Pig rails create a narrow space along the sides of the box that allows puppies to escape if the bitch accidentally rolls against them.

Accidental crushing remains one of the leading causes of puppy mortality during the first week of life.

Essential Whelping Supplies

Every breeder should assemble supplies before labor begins.

A well-stocked kit includes:

- Digital thermometer
- Lubricant
- Towels
- Hemostats
- Unwaxed dental floss
- Bulb syringe
- Betadine
- Disposable gloves
- Scale
- Puppy identification collars
- Notebook
- Emergency veterinary phone numbers

Having supplies prepared beforehand prevents panic during labor.

Behavioral Changes Before Labor

As progesterone levels begin to decline, behavioral changes often occur.

The bitch may:

- Refuse food
- Become clingy
- Seek isolation
- Dig bedding
- Shred paper
- Pant
- Pace
- Tremble

These behaviors are normal and indicate that hormonal changes are preparing the body for labor.

Extreme nesting behavior often occurs within six to twenty-four hours of delivery.

Monitoring the Dam

The breeder should begin close observation during the final week.

Daily observations should include:

- Appetite
- Water consumption
- Activity level
- Vaginal discharge
- Mammary development
- Rectal temperature

Maintaining written records is invaluable.

Subtle changes often become obvious only when recorded over time.

Key Point

The final week before whelping is a period of preparation rather than intervention. The breeder's responsibility is to provide excellent nutrition, a clean and quiet environment, disease protection, and careful observation. Most bitches will whelp naturally when allowed to progress through the final stages of pregnancy with minimal stress and maximum support.