



## **Phantom Pregnancy in the Dog**

Phantom pregnancy can be a distressing condition for dogs and a worrying and confusing time for owners. This article explains the difference between a true pregnancy and a false pregnancy and provides information regarding the reproductive cycle of the bitch making it easier to understand the condition.

### **Phantom Pregnancy**

Phantom pregnancy, also known as false, or pseudo-pregnancy is a condition in which dogs, without actually being pregnant, experience various physical and behavioural changes commonly associated with pregnancy. This condition is relatively common and is thought to occur in up to 87% of unneutered bitches at some point during their life, with 64% suffering from the condition on a regular basis.

### **The Reproductive Cycle**

Unneutered female dogs reach sexual maturity anywhere between 6 to 18 months of age. The reproductive cycle of the bitch consists of various stages; anoestrus, pro-oestrus, oestrus and dioestrus.

#### **Anoestrus**

During anoestrus the bitch is reproductively inactive. The reproductive cycle is effectively resting and you will not notice any symptoms associated with this.

#### **Proestrus**

This is the period of time preceding oestrus which lasts for approximately 9 days. You may notice swelling of the vulva and a bloody discharge. As a result of this your dog may frequently lick her back end.

#### **Oestrus**

Oestrus is when your dog is more commonly known as being 'in heat'. As with proestrus this phase of the cycle also lasts around 9 days. The vulva discharge normally becomes clear during this period of time but you will see continuation of vulval swelling. Your bitch may also appear to be more restless. It is during oestrus that your dog may become pregnant if she comes into contact with an uncastrated male and is mated. During oestrus your bitch will be highly attractive to male dogs!

Proestrus and oestrous periods are commonly referred to as 'being in season'.

## **Dioestrus (metoestrus)**

Dioestrus, also known as metoestrus, is the period of time following oestrus during which the mated bitch will begin and end her pregnancy. During this time there is an increase in a hormone called Prolactin which is responsible for the clinical signs commonly seen in the pregnant dog. Even if the bitch was not mated Prolactin still increases but, to a lesser extent. As a result it is normal for bitches to experience some degree of mammary (breast) development after being in season. In some bitches these signs are become more pronounced and ultimately result in the dog experiencing a false pregnancy.

The main signs of false pregnancy are commonly observed 6-8 weeks after 'a season' towards the end of what would have been a normal pregnancy. It is important to remember that if your dog has come into contact with an unneutered (uncastrated) male during oestrus 'heat' then there is a possibility she may be pregnant. It is not possible to distinguish between false and real pregnancy based solely on the clinical signs observed unless you are certain your dog has not been mated. If you are unsure it is important to seek advice from your vet and to rule out a true pregnancy. In order to do this your vet may feel your dog's abdomen or perform further diagnostic tests, such as an ultrasound scan.

## **Clinical Signs**

### **Mammary gland development**

The mammary glands in the bitch may increase in size. A certain degree of enlargement is normal during dioestrus however in pseudopregnancy mammary gland development becomes more noticeable. You may also see secretions from the glands. Most commonly this is milk; however it can be brownish in colour. Secretions that are any other colour apart may indicate an infection in the mammary glands (mastitis). Your vet will be able to advise you on additional treatment for this. It is important not to 'milk out' the glands as this will only stimulate more milk to be produced.

### **Behavioural changes**

During a false pregnancy dogs may exhibit behavioural changes commonly seen during normal pregnancy. Your bitch may try to make a nest and become attached to her toys or other inanimate objects. Becoming unusually aggressive or nervous around other dogs is also a possibility. Your dog may also be less interested in her food however gain weight. Rarely, you may see contraction of her stomach, mimicking the actions of giving birth.

## **Treatment**

The symptoms associated with a false pregnancy will resolve without treatment when the dioestrus phase of the reproductive cycle ends and the bitch enters anoestrus, the inactive stage of the cycle. The symptoms take approximately 1-3 weeks to completely resolve on their own. Treatment may not be necessary if symptoms are mild, however the severity of signs varies between individuals and if your pet is distressed by the condition there are ways to end a false pregnancy and resolve the physical and behavioural changes associated with the condition. Drugs are available which inhibit the action of the hormone Prolactin, most commonly Cabergoline. Resolution of symptoms usually occurs 5-7 days after starting treatment however your vet will be able to provide more information regarding this. The drug can cause some nausea and even vomiting but it is advisable to continue the course for up to 6 days if possible

## **The future**

A false pregnancy is not a sign of an abnormal reproductive cycle. In fact it shows your bitch is cycling normally however exhibiting exaggerated clinical signs associated with normal dioestrus. It will not affect her fertility or her chances of becoming pregnant in the future.

Unfortunately it is not possible to predict whether this will happen again however, having a false pregnancy once has not been shown to increase the chance of your bitch having another. The way to prevent this is to remove the ovaries which are responsible for the secretion of hormones and the reproductive cycle in the bitch. To permanently resolve the condition if you do not wish to breed from your bitch we would advise that you bitch is spayed. Please refer to the article on bitch spays for more information on this procedure.

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