

YOUR FIRST LITTER A CRASH COURSE IN WHELPING

by Linda Hazen Lewin

So, you've had your bitch bred and the expected puppies constitute your first attempt at whelping a litter. You're probably nervous and excited at the same time, and you should be! There is a lot to do to prepare yourself, your family, your home and your bitch for the addition of new babies. The following are some tips to help make things as easy as possible.

Things To Do Ahead of Time

The first item is to notify your vet that your bitch is expecting. An amazing number of people neglect to tell their vet and when the magic day (or night -- usually at 2:00 am) arrives and something goes wrong, the owners can't reach him or her. Make sure your vet knows the due date and make sure you know what the clinic's emergency policy is, in case you need help during the whelping. The last thing you need in an emergency is to have to find an open clinic and then have to deal with a stranger who doesn't know you and doesn't know your bitch. Get all the contingencies lined up well ahead of time.

Your pregnant girl will need a whelping box in which to have the pups. A large whelping box can also serve as the puppies' playpen and home until they are old enough to go to their new homes. If you choose to go this way, make sure it is of a material sturdy enough to handle the wear and tear for at least 12 weeks after the pups are born. Also make sure that it is big enough to accommodate the largest imaginable litter at the age of 12 weeks. I have found a box about 4' x 5' to be a very handy size for Manchester puppies. Obviously, when the pups are nursing they won't need all that space, but when they get up on their feet, weaned and running around, you will be amazed at how small that box looks! Be sure the sides of the box are high enough (about 2-1/2') to contain the pups when they're old enough to start climbing, which they all do by 6 or 7 weeks of age. Make one side or corner hinged or adjustable so that it can be lowered to allow the bitch to jump in and out. After the pups are weaned, it can be left up all the time.

The whelping box should be in an area of your house that is quiet and warm. It should be lined about 5" deep with newspaper. Do not put in any kind of sheets, blankets or pads because they will just get soiled during whelping, plus the newborns have a tendency to get caught up in or under them and can suffocate (or the bitch can inadvertently lie on them and squash them). Do not ever use a new piece of carpeting because the stain-resistant finishes used on carpet react with the puppies' urine and become dangerously acidic to their skin. You can use an older piece of carpet or a small "bathroom rug" which has been through the wash several times so the stain-resistant finish is gone. All in all, for newborns and for the whelping process, newspaper is best because it can be easily removed and replaced as it gets dirty.

Many bitches appreciate having a sheet draped over the top of the whelping box in the corner in which they've decided to whelp. It makes it more cave-like and natural for them. If you must have the whelping box in a cool area, you should use a heat lamp clipped to the side of the box and shining down on the area where the bitch is whelping.

Set your whelping box up at least three weeks before the bitch is due and acclimate her to it so she knows it's her den. Many breeders feed their bitch in the box so she associates it with good things. She should also sleep in the box at night. (During this pre-whelping period, it's fine to give her a pad or blanket to sleep on but you want to remove it before she gives birth.) Get her used to the idea of jumping in and out over the side, and praise her and give her a treat for jumping into it. If all goes well, she should naturally want to be in her whelping box when the time comes.

As far as feeding your pregnant bitch, it is best to simply continue with her normal dog food and multiple vitamins (if you give these), but feed her as much as she wants rather than a regulated amount. There is no need to supplement a healthy bitch and indeed, supplements can dangerously imbalance the bitch's diet at the very time when her system needs it to be what she is used to. So, don't overdo the extras. If you must add things to her food, add easily digestible proteins such as cottage cheese or a boiled egg once in a while. It is best to avoid raw eggs or raw meat as the potential for bacterial contamination is too high to risk with a pregnant bitch. As the pregnancy progresses and the puppies start taking up more room inside, she may not be able to hold as much food as usual at one time. Split her feedings so she gets to eat two or three times a day rather than trying to fit it all into one. Alternatively, you might allow her to free-feed, so long as she's not the piggy type who will eat until she blows up!

Regarding exercise, your bitch will seem quite normal in size, shape and activity level for most of her pregnancy and can do anything she feels like doing. As she starts to look chubby, you should cut back on any prolonged running and jumping about and try to ensure she doesn't fall off of anything. If allowed to, your bitch will regulate herself and will not do anything she doesn't feel up to, so don't push her with enforced exercise. It is also best to keep her at home, so she is not exposed to communicable disease from other dogs. As her whelping date draws near, she may be quite uncomfortable and may need some help getting into her box. Use common sense and let your bitch's behavior guide you as to what to do.

How to Know When It's Time -- And What To Do

There are two ways to tell when your bitch is close to whelping. The first way is to take her temperature every day as the date draws near. A dog's normal temperature is 101*. A bitch that is getting ready to whelp will show temperature fluctuations between 101* and 98* or so for several days ahead of time; when her temperature drops and stays down for a whole day, she will whelp within the next 24 hours. She may even shiver visibly, in which case, crank up that heat lamp and encourage her to stay in her box!

The other way to tell is by her "nesting" in her whelping box. Nesting behavior consists of her taking all that newspaper you neatly placed in the box and tossing it all over the place, digging into it, laying down in it, and then getting up and "re-doing" it forty-nine times. She will seem restless and preoccupied, and she is indeed making a nest for her expected pups. Don't correct her or try to make her stop -- it is natural maternal behavior. Tell her she's a good girl!

Some bitches show nesting behavior for a few days ahead of time and some don't do it until they are within 12 hours of delivery. Either way, that is your cue to set up your army cot and sleeping bag, put on a pot of coffee, and be on red alert.

What to Do When the Puppies Come

Manchesters are usually wonderful mothers (even the first-timers!) and it is quite miraculous to see all the instincts come to the fore at whelping time. My own experience has consisted of sitting by the side of the box and watching while the bitch does it all. I will describe first the normal whelping procedure, and then give tips on what to do if something weird happens.

First, you will notice the bitch starts to pant and may get up and lie down several times as if she's vaguely uncomfortable. As she goes into hard labor, you will see her side actually ripple as the uterus contracts. After each contraction, she will grunt softly and then relax until the next one. Tell her she's a good girl (sympathetic nursing does wonders), and keep watching.

Hard labor, as described above, may go on for anywhere from 10 minutes to two hours before anything happens, but then you will see what looks like a black balloon protruding from the bitch's vulva. That is the natal sac; if the sac has already broken (not uncommon), you will see two little paws and then a nose laying on top of the paws. With a couple more contractions, the puppy will slide out and Mama will reach back there and clean him up. The placenta, still attached to the umbilical cord, will follow and the mother will eat that – which is gross, but perfectly normal and necessary, as the placenta contains oxytocin, a hormone that both makes the bitch drop her milk and helps establish the mother-baby bond. The bitch will then chew the umbilical cord off close to the puppy's body. Next, she will tumble the puppy about with her nose to get it breathing (it looks rough on the puppy, but it's not), and then will nudge it around to her belly so it can find a nipple.

Your job through all of this is threefold: 1) make sure a placenta comes out with each puppy because if a placenta is retained by the bitch after whelping, it will cause a raging infection, 2) make sure that the bitch, in her enthusiasm, is not chewing the umbilical cord off too close to the puppy, which can cause umbilical hernia. A 3/4" tassel is short enough. And, 3) make sure the puppy is breathing properly and has started to nurse. The first milk, colostrum, is essential in providing the puppy's initial nourishment and antibodies. As the first puppy settles in, the bitch should be starting contractions to deliver the next one. And so on, and so on, and so on!

Okay, so what if all of this doesn't happen? When do you get involved? Here are several pointers: Regarding labor, don't let hard labor (panting and grunting and rippling sides) go on for longer than 2-1/2 or 3 hours without a puppy being produced. There may be a puppy too large to come over the pelvic brim, or two puppies trying to come out at the same time, and you don't want the bitch to exhaust herself or rupture her uterus with useless pushing if something's stuck. Call your vet and take her in right away!

In case of a breech birth (very common in dogs and not nearly so dangerous as in humans), you will see hind feet and a tail come out, rather than front feet. With a breech, I like to help just a little bit to get the puppy out quickly because if the sac has broken, his head is still stuck up inside the bitch and he can't breathe. Grasp both hind feet firmly (they will be slippery), and as the bitch contracts, pull slowly downward, toward the bitch's hocks. Do not yank, and never pull when the bitch is not contracting. After the puppy's head is out, let the bitch finish up with cleaning him and taking care of the cord and placenta.

In case a puppy doesn't start breathing promptly, pick the pup up and place him tummy down in your hand, with his head toward your fingertips and his rear toward your wrist. Place your other hand on top of the pup to hold him in place and swing your arms in an arc, elbows straight, from face level toward your knees. Let the force of your swing be mostly gravity -- do not swing sharply. The centripetal force of the swing will usually clear fluid from the lungs and the puppy will squawk or cough, and start breathing. You may have to swing two or three times, but never swing the pup forcefully. If swinging doesn't work, you can try artificial respiration. Cover the pup's nose and mouth with your mouth and breath the finest puff of air into the pup. Remember, puppies' lungs are tiny and immature, so be very careful doing this. If the puppy has a collapsed lung, AR may be enough to inflate it and the puppy will then breathe on its own.

If the bitch has a large litter and/or pops the puppies out quickly, she may not have time to get each pup cleaned up, breathing and nursing before the next one is on its way. Also, at the start of a large litter, she may be physically unable to bend around to her rear end to tend to business. Toward the end of a large litter, she may be too exhausted to manage. In these cases, she will need your help in settling the newborns while she gets on with labor.

As a pup is born, keep a steady pull (do not yank) on the umbilical cord until the placenta emerges. Grasping the umbilical cord with the help of a paper towel is a good idea as the puppy, cord and sac are all very slippery. When the puppy and placenta are both out, break the sac (if it didn't break on its

own) and get the puppy breathing. You can roll the puppy around, just as the bitch would, to stimulate breathing and circulation. To break the umbilical cord, pinch it hard with both of your thumbs and forefingers. While pinching, hold the hand that is toward the bitch steady, and with the puppy-side hand, use a stroking motion toward the puppy's body and work on it until it tears (tearing is better than cutting, as cutting the cord can allow too much blood out and infection in). Dispose of the placenta. NOTE: Never cut the cord while the placenta is still inside the bitch! The cord is very slippery and is likely to slip back up inside the bitch, and then you can't get the placenta out. Let the mother lick the puppy dry, or rub the puppy vigorously with a towel until it is dry, and then put it on a nipple so it can nurse. Make sure it does nurse; remember, the colostrum is essential nourishment for the puppy as a newborn. Do each puppy the same way, but always be ready to back off and allow the bitch to do everything again, once she is able.

What if the bitch starts labor and then stops, or has two or three puppies and then stops contracting, and you know she has more puppies in there? This, like hard labor with no puppy produced, is another reason to contact your vet right away. It is called uterine inertia, and the puppies will die inside the bitch if something isn't done to get them out. With Manchester Terriers, this is a fairly unusual condition, but it does happen now and then. If your bitch suddenly stops contracting and doesn't resume within an hour or so, get her to your vet.

If the bitch starts to look wobbly, faint, glassy-eyed, or "wifty" in any way, there are two possibilities: either low blood sugar or eclampsia. When a bitch has been in labor for hours with a large or difficult litter, she may simply be exhausted and need a boost. Bits of toast soaked with butter and honey or Karo syrup are useful to help raise blood sugar levels quickly.

Eclampsia is a severe systemic shortage of calcium occurring in some bitches which produce a lot of milk. If the bitch's food does not provide enough calcium for milk production, her system will actually drain calcium from her bones and blood. If her blood level calcium drops far enough, she will become droopy and trembly and look like she's going to faint (which she will if calcium isn't replaced immediately). Get her and the pups to the vet right away. The vet will give her a calcium shot (which will effect an instantaneous recovery on the bitch's part) and probably some calcium supplements to take home with you. Keep a close eye on the bitch for the next few weeks to assure that eclampsia does not recur.

As I said earlier, Manchester bitches are usually terrific mothers and natural whelpers. The best you can do for your bitch is to provide a calm, quiet atmosphere and lots of praise for doing the right thing. When that first puppy emerges, praise your bitch and tell her she's a good girl. Ooh and ah over the puppy, without interfering with what the bitch is doing. Occasional first-time mothers are confused about what's going on and don't understand what that thing is that just popped out! In that case, get the puppy out and breathing, and the cord cut, and put the puppy right under the bitch's nose while it is still wet. She will smell it (if only out of curiosity), recognize her own smell, and will then lick it and clean it up. If she still doesn't get it, try putting something sweet on the puppy, like a dab of honey or a bit of butter, to get the bitch licking. All the while, praise, praise, praise, so your bitch knows this is a wonderful thing she just did and you're so pleased with her! Continue to keep an eye on her although after the first puppy, she should be fine.

I am a great believer in letting nature take its course, interfering as little as possible in the whelping process. Letting the bitch tend to her own puppies promotes maternal bonding and results in the best psychological state for both mother and puppies. The bitch must allow you to touch and handle her pups, but if you interfere too much, she may just jump out of the box and say, "Fine. You do it.!" The key is knowing when you must get involved, for the health and safety of the mother and/or the puppies. When in doubt, call the vet. That's why you got his emergency number in the first place.

What to Do Afterwards

After all the pups are born and have nursed, put a collar and leash on your bitch and take her out to relieve herself. She will probably not want to go, so be prepared to lift her out of the whelping box and drag her outside -- once she's out, she'll realize how badly she has to go! Don't keep her outside longer than necessary, or expect her to play -- she has motherhood on her mind! Walk her back to the box on her leash. If you don't, she's likely to go tearing into her box full-speed and land on the puppies. Make sure she is not lying on any of them when she settles back in. You will have to take her in and out on her leash for several days until she gets over her "new mother hysteria" with her puppies. Your other option, if you have the space and scrubbable flooring, is to put several sheets of newspaper on the floor outside the whelping box so she can relieve herself on it rather than having to leave her puppies entirely to go outside.

Most bitches appreciate a snack after they whelp (sometimes during!) and it is good to give them a high-energy something to help restore their reserves. I make my bitches a bowl of warm milk with honey in it, which is easy on the stomach and replenishes badly-needed glucose and calcium. As mentioned above, small pieces of toast with butter and honey on them are another good option.

Remove any wet or badly-soiled newspaper so the bitch and neonates don't get chilled. Don't give the bitch a bath yet -- her pups won't be able to find her. Newborn puppies have only the senses of temperature, touch and smell; the smell of the bitch is all they have to guide them to the milk bar! If she is a little icky with birth fluids, just use warm water and a cloth to get the worst of it off. Do not use soap or shampoo because these will disguise her smell from the puppies. You can give her a "real" bath at the end of a week or so if she needs it.

Turn on your heat lamp, if you are using one, but keep an eye on the temperature -- heat lamps can be very dehydrating on the puppies, and if it gets too hot for the bitch she will continually move away from the heat and leave her pups. If she is uncomfortably hot, clip the lamp to the opposite end of the whelping box from the nest, replace the infrared bulb with a regular light bulb, tilt the lamp to shine on one wall of the box rather than right on the nest, or remove the heat lamp completely and let the bitch warm the pups naturally with her own body heat. Make sure the pups stay near her -- there always seems to be one adventurous and directionally-impaired one that crawls off and gets lost at the other end of the box! If the whelping box is in a normally-heated part of the house and is away from drafts, you probably won't need a heat lamp. Watch out for chilled puppies, though, as newborns cannot regulate their own body temperature.

Other than the above, things should be pretty quiet for a few weeks until the puppies are ready to be weaned from the mother (at about 3-4 weeks of age). The bitch does all the feeding and cleaning up of the pups, and if all is normal with them, they just eat and sleep a lot. Your vet may want to see the bitch and the litter within a day or two of the whelping. He or she will check them for umbilical hernias, cleft palates, or other congenital defects, and will check the bitch for retained placentas, mastitis, or any other form of infection. If you are having dewclaws removed from the puppies, he will do that at this time too. If you go to the vet, leave the puppies in the car with your bitch until the vet is ready to see them. Do not sit in the waiting room with them, exposing them to every germ known to man!

In the meantime, feed your bitch as much as she will eat, as she is feeding a litter and will need all the nourishment she can get. Many bitches lose condition terribly after whelping because the owners are feeding her her regular ration, when what she really needs is two or three times that much! Don't skimp on feeding your bitch. Also, put a water bowl in the same room as the whelping box, or even in the box, so your bitch can have free access to water during the day without having to go far from her babies. She needs lots of water while she's lactating, to help with milk production and to keep her kidneys flushed.

Finally, do not invite people in to see the newborn puppies. For one thing, you are endangering them by exposing them to all the germs people bring in on their feet and hands, and for another, you'll upset the bitch. Upset bitches, especially first-timers, have been known to do horrendous things when they think their puppies are in danger, up to and including killing them. Don't risk it. Family members can (and should) handle the puppies gently and get them used to being picked up and cuddled, but always do this quietly and calmly in the presence of the mother, as she will be anxious about anyone taking her puppies out of sight. She and her puppies should be protected from commotion, incessant foot traffic and strangers, as well as any other dogs you may have in the house. When the puppies are weaned and have had their first shots at seven weeks, they are old enough for outside visitors.

I hope this has been helpful to you, and not too scary! Most the time, everything goes swimmingly and you really don't have to do anything except keep an eye on things. The real work starts when the pups are weaned, and you have to feed them and clean up after them! But that's another story...