

Neonatal Problems

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Ailments every breeder hopes never to see in a litter.

Most litters are as routine as the sun rising in the east. There is little new under our sun - even in canine reproduction. Nevertheless, even experienced breeders can occasionally run across a condition that is new to them. For instance, the first time you see a cleft palate on a puppy, it is frightening and upsetting, no matter how often you've heard about it. A brief overview of some of the most serious neonatal conditions follow.

Be Prepared

Anasarca: Pups suffering from this ailment are grotesquely swollen at birth with excessive amounts of fluid. They are often termed "walrus," "rubber" or "water" pups, and usually require a Caesarean delivery. This condition arises as a result of lowered plasma protein levels, lymphatic obstruction or increased venous pressure. Anasarca causes edema throughout the entire body and, in severe cases, can be fatal. Some veterinarians have successfully administered a diuretic such as furosemide to ease mild forms of this disorder. I know of several Bulldog pups saved this way.

Atresia ani: This birth defect involves the lack of an anal opening or a missing section of tissue between the bowel and anus. The pup is unable to defecate: affected individuals will appear bloated and will cry in distress. To survive, a pup with this condition must have immediate surgical repair. I know of one Bernese Mountain Dog breeder who elected to do this, knowing that she would have to keep the puppy herself and offer post-surgical care for several months.

Fading puppies: This is the broad term for when a litter stops nursing, then begins to sicken and die for no apparent reason. There are various underlying causes, including an organic birth defect, a virus or any one of a dozen different deficiencies or diseases. Fluids and warmth are vital when attempting to find the cause.

Canine herpesvirus is often a culprit while the puppies have low temperatures during the first three weeks of life. Diarrhea, listlessness, cessation of nursing and constant crying are symptoms of this viral ailment and, even if saved, survivors may have kidney damage.

Septicemia: No matter how clean breeders keep the nursery, a whelping box is not a sterile place. Before the umbilical cord dries and seals, bacteria can gain entry to the body through the cord and spread to the bloodstream. Septicemia can be prevented by dabbing the unhealed cord with tincture of iodine and keeping the box as clean as possible. If an infection occurs, it may respond to antibiotics.

Neonatal conjunctivitis: When pus forms around an unopened eye, an infection of the conjunctiva may be at fault. Keep the area clean by wiping with cotton soaked in warm water. If the eye area is swollen, however, it may be necessary for a veterinarian to separate the eyelids and drain the pus before starting follow-up treatment with ophthalmic ointment and antibiotics. A German

Shepherd breeder I know thus saved the sight of a future top- winning and producing champion.

Juvenile pyoderma: This is a condition in which Staphylococcal eruptions occur on the skin. Pimples may appear on the lips, eyes and neck, or on the belly and groin where they may be aggravated by urine soiling. Keep the infected area clean with an antiseptic disinfectant such as Betadine. Antibiotics usually cure the problem, but pups that are hypersensitive to the bacteria may develop massive swelling of the lymph nodes, often accompanied by draining abscesses. The puppy I saw with this condition looked like he had mumps, which explains why the term "strangles" is often associated with pyoderma. These cases require aggressive cortisone treatment in addition to the anti-bacterial therapy.

Be Kind

Because the following defects are usually painfully fatal to pups and emotionally taxing for breeders, euthanasia is often the kindest recourse.

Cleft palate and harelip: Harelip puppies are born with a split in their upper lip that sometimes extends into the nose. This is often accompanied by a cleft palate (a split in the roof of the mouth) which allows milk to drain into the nose when the pup nurses. Pups can starve or succumb to pneumonia from inhaling milk into the lungs.

Hydrocephalus: An abnormal increase in the amount of cerebrospinal fluid in the ventricles of the brain which causes an enlarged, domed skull and eyes that bulge and exhibit strabismus (looking in two directions). The pressure on the brain usually causes incoordination, retardation or death.

Schistosoma reflexus: A failure of the abdominal wall to close completely resulting in organs resting outside the body. As the intestines push through the opening and become contaminated, the result is peritonitis. If the pup is born in sterile conditions, such as during a C-section, corrective surgery may be attempted.

Be Smart

Just like the man who served as his own lawyer and had a fool for a client, a breeder shouldn't try to practice veterinary medicine. Although therapy can sometimes be administered at home for these conditions, they must first be diagnosed by a veterinarian. While none of the congenital ailments listed here are proven to be hereditary, dogs suffering from them should not be bred.

Fortunately, even longtime breeders seldom see the alarming defects or illnesses described here. Most puppies are healthy and blessedly normal. But when there is a deviation from the norm, even veteran breeders instantly contact a veterinarian for assistance. The most important nursery care for a breeder to remember and carry out is simple and effective: If you weigh and examine pups daily, as well as provide adequate warmth, you'll become aware of an abnormality as soon as it appears.

Ms. Walkowicz has been a breeder since the 1970s. Her book, *Old Dogs, Old Friends* was published in July.

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