

Setting Up a Welfare-Friendly Whelping Area

by Croney Research Group

Before giving birth, dogs naturally seek out a place to nest. Support your dog's instincts by providing a whelping area that feels safe and comfortable. A good whelping box set up reduces stress for your dam so she can focus on caring for her puppies.



If you are moving your dog to a new area for whelping, it's a good idea to set it up at least two weeks before the end of your dog's pregnancy. Give her time to get used to her new space and/or the whelping box before she needs it.

Where to set up your whelping area

Dams need a quiet, calm place to give birth. Do your best to set up the whelping area away from barking dogs and noise, in a low traffic area. In kennels, having a separate area or room for moms and puppies is ideal.



Make sure that your dam will still have access to areas where she can eliminate or get outdoor exercise. If your dam doesn't have access to an outside run, be sure to take her outside regularly to eliminate and exercise. Meet your dam's social needs but try to stick with known, trusted handlers.

Cleaning

The whelping area should be cleaned daily. Pick a time when mom needs to go to outside or take a break from her puppies. Place the puppies in a small box or carrier lined with a towel while you clean. This is also a great time to weigh the puppies. Once puppies are three weeks of age, this is also a great time to do some gentle handling and socialization.

(see our Handouts: **Quick Tips for Success: Puppy Body Handling** and **Puppy Socialization**)



The perfect whelping box

Many breeders choose to provide their dogs with a whelping box within the general whelping area. A whelping box can keep puppies contained and warm, while helping your dam feel sheltered. You may choose to buy a commercially available box, or you may prefer to build your own. Whether you choose to buy or build:

- The whelping box must be sanitized between dogs and litters. Use a box made from a non-porous surface, such as plastic or plexiglass.
- The ideal whelping box has a railing (known as a “pig rail”) around the edge. This prevents the dam from accidentally laying on her puppies.
- The whelping box should be large enough that your dam can relax and stretch out. Aim for one and a half times your dog’s body length.
- The box should have an opening that allows easy access in and out for your dam, but keeps her puppies contained. She should also have a large space outside the box where she can stretch out and take a break from her puppies.
- A whelping box with sharp edges can injure your dam’s mammary glands and put her at risk for infection (mastitis). Keep the whelping box clean and free of rough edges.



An easy, affordable option for a whelping box is to repurpose a plastic “kiddie” pool. There are several videos online demonstrating how to add a railing by zip-tying a pool noodle around the edge.



Warm and cozy

A whelping area should be warm, with adequate temperature control. The ideal ambient temperature range for newborn puppies is between 70-80°F. Seal gaps around doors and windows to prevent drafts. Provide natural or dim lighting – keep the light cycle as normal as possible and avoid constant light.

Recommended temperatures for neonatal puppies

Age (Weeks)	Ambient (Room) Temperature (°F)	Whelping Box Temperature (°F)
1	75-80	85-90
2	70-80	80-85
3-4	70-75	75-80

Heating sources



Puppies need help maintaining a healthy body temperature for their first three weeks.

The puppies and mom should have room to move away from the heat source if needed.

The dam will likely need access to cooler areas. Her comfortable temperature range can depend on her size and breed.

In addition to the recommended ambient temperature, the puppies need a warmer contact surface. This is important if the dam spends a lot of time away from her puppies.

Heat source	Pros	Cons
Heating pads	Small, affordable	Need to have a “low setting” and/or auto shutoff. Can cause burns if too hot or if pups can’t get away
Heat lamp	Affordable	Potential fire hazard, can get too hot
Radiant heat floors	Convenient, energy efficient	Expensive, may be hard for puppies and mom to move away depending on set up.
Snuggle Safe - microwavable discs	Affordable, easy to use	Don’t provide continuous heat, need to reheated frequently.
None		Pups may get chilled. Insufficient heat increases mortality and illness.

Bedding

Use absorbent, non-slip bedding and puppy pads or newspapers under bedding to keep the whelping area dry and clean. Shavings and washable pet beds can also be used as bedding.



Bedding	Pros	Cons
Puppy pads, shavings, newspapers	Absorbent, inexpensive	Slippery, no padding
Carpet	Inexpensive, non-slip	Not washable, cannot be disinfected. Must be thrown away frequently. Can fray. Puppies' toes can get stuck or entangled when frayed.
Towels and blankets	Inexpensive, can be washed and sanitized	Slippery. Puppies can get entangled in them. Dams can accidentally crush their puppies digging in them.
WonderFleece or similar	Comfortable, absorbent, safe. Can be washed and sanitized.	Relatively expensive