



ANIMAL ANTICS

Note for Pet Owners:

Pet Patrol 365 provides this information for educational purposes only. You should seek the advice of your veterinarian if your pet is ill, as only they can correctly advise on the diagnosis and the recommended treatment for your pet.

PHANTOM PREGNANCY IN DOGS

A phantom (false) pregnancy is the term used when a bitch is not pregnant but shows signs of pregnancy, lactation, nursing and nesting. Phantom pregnancies are not uncommon. Some figures show that up to 60% of bitches experience them to some extent during their lifetime. It develops 6-14 weeks after a season, at which time the bitch has a normal rise in the hormone prolactin. In some individuals, this level is excessive and clinical signs of false pregnancy occur.

Prolactin is one of the normal hormones of pregnancy and so the clinical signs seen are typical of a pregnant bitch. The mammary glands develop and milk may be produced. Affected animals often make nests and may collect objects, such as toys and shoes, within the bed as though they are puppies. They may be dull and inappetent. Sometimes aggression will be seen, even in a normally placid bitch. Engorged mammary glands are more susceptible to infection. However, not all signs will be present in any one individual.

Phantom pregnancy is commonly thought to be a natural phenomenon, dating from the days of when dogs lived in packs. All bitches in the pack would come into season together even though only the alpha (dominant) bitch would mate. The alpha female's pups would be cared for and suckled by the rest of the females in the pack. Pseudopregnancy (phantom pregnancy) made this possible, as all the other bitches would have milk to give to the alpha female's offspring and to allow the true mother respite or time to hunt.

Some owners wonder if mating their bitch will stop the occurrence of phantom pregnancies but the opposite has been shown to be true. Bitches who have whelped may in fact be more likely to have phantom pregnancies.

Some vets will delay a spaying if a bitch is suffering a false pregnancy as the ovarian hormones play an important role in stopping the false pregnancy and, therefore, they would not wish to remove them surgically.

Treatment

- Often the passage of time is all that may be needed, as the bitch's level of prolactin will usually fall naturally by about 12-14 weeks post season.
- Lactation can be reduced by a moderate restriction of food and water intake, which means there is less calories and water available for milk production. This must not be so excessive as to make the bitch ill or dehydrated. Furthermore, it is important not to stroke the bitch's tummy as this may mimic the presence of puppies and encourage her to lactate.
- Nesting and other abnormal behaviours can be deterred by distraction - increase the level of exercise and remove beds and toys that the animal may be nesting with. Take care not to remove a toy which the bitch has become aggressively possessive of whilst she is present.
- Drugs - reproductive hormones, anti-prolactic drugs and diuretics can be used if the above simple methods have not worked or immediately if the bitch is aggressive.
- Spay - this is the long-term prevention of future episodes, once the episode in question has been treated as above.

If your bitch has suffered a false pregnancy discuss the options for treatment with your veterinary surgeon.

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