

Nursing Mothers and Their Puppies

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Intro

Often dogs land at the shelter pregnant or nursing very young puppies. An animal shelter can be a very scary place for a new mother – getting them into a foster home as soon as possible is the best way to help her take care of her puppies well. Fostering a mother dog and her puppies is a huge job and can be a long term foster as well – sometimes 8 to 10 weeks to get the puppies big and healthy enough for adoption. It is often a messy job as well! Fostering nursing mothers and her puppies is not for everyone – but the rewards of watching a mother care for her pups and helping those pups develop into healthy, happy dogs is extremely rewarding.

Getting Started

Depending on the age of the puppies, the needs of the nursing mother dog will be different. For instance, a mother with newborn puppies will need very little assistance from you. She will need a very quiet warm place, preferably a whelping box, plenty of food and fresh water and opportunities to leave her puppies for short periods of time to eliminate. The less interaction you have with puppies under 4 weeks of age, the better, they are very fragile and handling them may needlessly stress out the mother. A nursing mother does NOT need to interact with owned pets during this period of time, she may become very aggressive if she fears her pups may be in any danger – even if your pets have never had any sort of issue with another animal, they should not meet the nursing mother dog during this critical period. Once the pups start eating on their own, they will begin exploring their environment more and more and the mother will welcome some help entertaining them, feeding them, cleaning them and having longer and longer periods away from them. Perhaps in the yard by herself or short walks around the neighborhood. Take your cues from the mother though – if she seems anxious away from her puppies, leave her with them.

Supplies

- **Whelping box** if pups are under 4 weeks of age.



An upside down ½ of a crate will work, a large box with a small walkway cut out, a baby pool or baby gating an area off so the puppies stay close to the mother. The mother needs to be able to easily leave the area to eliminate away from her puppies and stretch her legs as necessary. Change bedding regularly and make sure the area is free of drafts. Keeping a very even temperature is very important.

- **Newspapers** Keep several layers in the bottom of the box, and they will come in handy when the puppies start to roam around the room.
- **Water bowls** Heavy and impossible to tip. Should be stainless steel or porcelain/ceramic, NOT plastic, as plastic is difficult to disinfect because it is so porous.
- **Food bowls (one more than the number of dogs you are fostering)** One is for the eat-at-will dry food, the other for canned food. You can use TV dinner trays, paper plates or whatever you have; any relatively flat plate or saucer will do. The larger the litter, the larger the plate should be so that no one gets crowded out.
- **Food** The shelter will provide both hard and canned food for your foster puppies.
- **Plenty of clean towels and blankets**
- **Toys** Plastic, disinfect-able toys are good to reuse for new litters. Clean tennis balls and old stuffed socks.
- **Baby gates and exercise pens** For confining the puppies as needed





Feeding

Age 0-4 Weeks

Mom: The nursing mother dog should be offered plenty of food at all times – nursing puppies is incredibly hard work and her calorie intake needs to be much higher than a non-lactating dog.

Most dog food prints recommended dosing for lactating mother dogs on the label. Make sure she always has access to hard kibble and fresh water because lactating dogs also tend to drink

more than non-nursing dogs. Throughout the foster period, feed mom as much as she will eat – you cannot over feed a momma dog!

Puppies: Puppies should nurse vigorously and compete for nipples. Newborns can nurse up to 45 minutes at a time. Be sure to watch puppies nursing at least once a day, if the mother will permit it. Check that everyone is nursing and that there isn't too much jockeying for position. A great deal of activity and crying could indicate a problem with milk flow, quality or availability. When the mother reenters the box, there should be some fussing for only a few minutes before everyone has settled down to serious nursing. Puppies will sleep 90% of the time and eat the other 10%.

Age 4-5 Weeks

Puppies usually can drink and eat from a saucer by 4 weeks. Weaning should be done gradually. Introduce them to solid food by offering warmed canned food, mixed with a little water into gruel, in a shallow saucer. You can begin by placing one puppy by the plate of canned food gruel, and hoping for the best - if she starts eating, great! Her littermates will probably copy her and do the same. Some puppies may prefer to lick the gruel from your fingers, if this is the case; slowly lower your finger to the plate and hold it to the food. This way the puppies will learn to eat with their heads bent down. The puppies will walk in it, slide in it, and track it all. Be patient, sometimes it takes two or three meals before they catch on.

Age 5-6 Weeks

Feed gruel 4 times a day. Thicken the gruel gradually by reducing the amount of water mixed with it. Introduce dry food and water. If you are fostering a litter with their mother, continue weaning. For reluctant eaters, try mixing some puppy milk replacer into the gruel or tempt the puppy with some meat-flavored human baby food mixed with a bit of water. The familiar formula taste and smell or the meat flavor of baby food is often more appealing to the picky eaters than dog food. Once the puppy accepts the formula based gruel or baby food gradually mix in dry puppy food until the puppy has been weaned like the other puppies.

Age 6-7 Weeks

By this age the puppies should be eating dry food well. Feed the puppies at least three meals daily. If one puppy appears food-possessive, use a second dish and leave plenty of food out so that everyone can eat at the same time. Although the puppies may not eat much at a single sitting, they usually like to eat at frequent intervals throughout the day.

Age 7-8 Weeks

Feeding: Offer dry food 3 - 4 times a day. Leave down a bowl of water for them to eat and drink at will. If you have a litter with a bitch, she should only be allowing brief nursing sessions, if any. Do not feed the puppies table scraps.

Age 8 weeks and over

Feeding: Offer dry food 3 times a day. Leave down a bowl of water for them to drink at will.

Eliminating

During the first 2-3 weeks of life puppies do not urinate and defecate on their own. This is stimulated when the mother is cleaning them. As the mother stops taking care of their eliminating needs but before the pups get the idea of eliminating outside of their nest, there will be A LOT of cleaning up for the foster provider to take care of. However, you can begin housebreaking at four weeks of age. This can be done by using a pile of newspapers or training pads in a corner. After each feeding, place the puppy on the papers, or outside, for him to go to the bathroom. Be patient! He may not remember to do this every time, or may forget where to find the papers, but he will learn quickly. Be sure to give the puppies lots of praise when they first start using their papers or cry to go out. It is a good idea to confine the puppies to a relatively small space, because the larger the area the puppies have to play in, the more likely they will forget where the papers are. Keep the papers clean and away from their food.



Socialization

Momma dogs will undoubtedly appreciate NOT having to deal with any other animals while they are nursing their puppies. Protecting and nurturing her puppies is her number one priority and any other animal could be seen as a threat to their safety, no matter how friendly they are. Keep momma dogs isolated from other pets in the home until you are certain she is very comfortable and completely non threatened, keep in mind this may be the entire time she is in your home. Once the puppies are around 5-6 weeks and can tolerate time away from mom, you can begin to introduce them to other animals in your home.

Growth and Development

In the 2 first weeks of life puppies are helpless and vulnerable. They are still developing basic reflexes, their hearing and vision is still not fully developed, and they are unable to properly control their body temperatures. They should therefore be confined to the nursery area. Young puppies should be kept in a large box or kennel lined with a towel for easy cleaning. It is very important to keep the puppies warm, especially during the first 2-3 weeks of life. A heating pad or a warm water bottle can be ideal sources of heating. If you use a heating pad make sure it only covers half or parts of the nursing area so that the neonates can move away from the heat if they need to, and also make sure it is set on "low" and that the electrical cord is out of reach of sharp little puppy teeth. The more puppies in your litter, the better able they will be to keep warm by sleeping together in a heap. Small litters and singletons need more help keeping warm, singletons will also often find comfort in a stuffed fluffy toy to snuggle up to. **Keep neonates away from heaters or cold drafts.** As the puppies get older, from 4-5 weeks of age, they can be allowed to roam a larger area of your house, but they should still be closely supervised and kept in a secured area when not confined to their nursing area. Remember these puppies are still very vulnerable to infections, such as canine parvo infection, and should be separated from other pets if possible, and only be allowed to interact with fully vaccinated, healthy dogs

Age 0-2 weeks:

- Ear canals open between 5 and 8 days.
- Eyes will open between 8 and 14 days. They open gradually, usually starting to open from the nose outward. All puppies are born with blue eyes, and initially no pupils can be distinguished from the irises - the eyes will appear solid dark blue.
- Healthy puppies will be round and warm, with pink skin. If you pinch them gently, their skin should spring back.
- When you pick a puppy up, it should wiggle energetically and when you put it down near the mom it should crawl back to her.
- Healthy puppies seldom cry.

Age 2-3 weeks:

- If there is a mother, she will begin to spend larger periods of time out of the nest, though she will not go far from it.
- Puppies begin to crawl around day 18 and can stand by day 21.
- They will begin to play with each other, biting ears, tails and paws even before their teeth have come in.
- Their milk teeth are cut during this period.
- They learn to sit and touch objects with their paws.
- Puppies begin their socialization phase - they will be strongly influenced by the behavior of their mother for the next six weeks. To further socialize puppies, increase the amount of handling, and get them accustomed to human contact. It is important not to expose them to anything frightening; children may seem intimidating and should be supervised closely while visiting to ensure gentle handling.

Age 3-5 weeks

- Adult eye color will begin to appear, but may not reach final shade for another 9 to 12 weeks.
- Puppies begin to see well and their eyes begin to look and function like adult dogs' eyes. Puppies will start cleaning themselves, though their mother will continue to do most of the serious cleaning.
- If there is a mother present, she will usually begin weaning by discouraging her puppies from nursing; however, some dogs (particularly those with small litters) will allow nursing until the puppies are old enough for permanent homes. Some nursing activity is the canine equivalent of thumb-sucking, that is, for comfort only. Even if puppies appear to be nursing, they may not be getting all the nutrition they need from mom. Make sure they are eating food and gaining weight.
- Be sure that the puppies always have access to fresh water in a low, stable bowl.

Age 5-6 weeks

- At about five weeks, puppies can start to roam around the room, under supervision. The strongest, most curious puppy will figure out how to get out of the nest. The others will quickly follow.
- Be sure to take them to their papers or outside after meals, during play sessions, and after naps. These are the usual times that puppies need to eliminate.
- Vaccinating and de-worming: Starting at about 4 weeks, puppies should get booster shots and de-worming every 2-3 weeks for a series of 3.

Age 6-8 weeks

- By this time, you have "mini-dogs." They will wash themselves, play games with each other, their toys, and you, and many will come when you call them.
- This is a very entertaining time to have puppies – they play hard, sleep hard and are learning all about their world. Socialization is KEY during this period to make sure the puppies learn not to be threatened by new things.

Age 8 weeks

- Puppies should now be ready for adoption if they are free of any symptoms of illness (runny nose, cough, diarrhea or hair loss).
- Take pictures of your puppies individually, cropped horizontally, and titled by their animal ID number and e-mail them to the foster coordinator for posting on the AAC website.
- Arrange for the puppies and mom to be spayed or neutered and microchipped so they are ready for adoption!

The following is a lovely detailed diary from one of our very first foster mom's to have newborn puppies in foster care, her ideas, observations and suggestions are very helpful!

Diary of a Foster Mom

I fostered an awesome Chihuahua mix mom and her 7 puppies from the end of September until mid November. I had them from when they were about 5 days old until they were 8 weeks. And happy to say, they've all been adopted and are with their forever families. It was an amazing experience that I will definitely be doing again.

From about 5 days to 3 weeks, they were mainly taken care of by their mom. I had an extra room that really came in handy because I also have an older male dog that was very curious about the puppies, as well as two old lady cats who weren't thrilled with having these weird new creatures in the house. If you don't have an extra room, I would recommend putting them in a large closet or a bathroom. Having a closed off space, I think, made her feel more comfortable. Sweet Pea (the mom) was really, really, really protective of these puppies. She warmed up to me right away but as soon as she saw my dog and was with the puppies, she would start barking at him. My advice with introducing them would be to let her get used to her space first and keep your dog as far away from them as possible. Once she's cool with you being around the puppies, then I would take her out and play with her and pet her as if she's your pet. This is when you can introduce her to your dog. I never let my dog in the puppy room and eventually he wasn't even that curious anymore. You will be amazed at how fast your momma dog can go from being smart, instinctual protective mom dog to being happy to please pet dog when taken away from her litter.



In the times when I took her away from her litter to go to the bathroom, hang out with me, and have some "time off" from being a food source :), I would leave the door open to the room and put up a baby gate so that she could hear and see her puppies at all times. When I took her out, she would do her business pretty quickly and then want to get right back to them. If she was hanging out with me and heard just a little peep out of one of them, she'd go running back in there to check it out. I forget why I did this, but one time I put her out of the room and shut the door while tending to the puppies and that was a big mistake because she became frantic - so I'd recommend never doing that - make sure she feels like she can always get back to them if she needs to.

While she was still nursing a whole bunch, and cleaning up after the pups (something that was a surprise to me! It's kind of gross that she will eat all their waste but it actually makes your job a lot easier and teaches them not to go potty where they sleep and eat) during this time, I had her on wet dog food and she ate like a horse!! That meant that she had to go to the bathroom A LOT and it's usually pretty runny (I really don't mean to be gross but I had to find out that this was pretty normal and that she wasn't sick.)



My set up in the room was as such: I bought a couple of big plastic sheets and two canvasses - the kind that you get at home depot as drop clothes for painting. The plastic sheets were about \$2 a piece and the canvasses I think were about \$8 a piece. I laid one piece of plastic out and covered it with one canvas. (I suggest multiple because you will throw out the plastic once it is dirty and launder one canvas while the other is being used.) I put out a couple of puppy pads for house training. These come in handy when the pups are only a couple of weeks old because the mother will be going to the bathroom A LOT and she will need to use those when you aren't able to take her out 8x a day and when the pups are older, they will tend to use those (and a lot of other places too). I also bought a baby pool (the only place I could find these was actually at PetSmart since it was fall and walmart and target weren't carrying them that time of year). This kept the puppies contained for the first couple of weeks. Your little ones look like they might already be at the stage when they would be getting out of the baby pool so not sure if this is necessary. The baby pool was the cheap version of a whelping pen. In the baby pool, I put more puppy pads and on top of those I put baby receiving blankets. (This was a great tip I learned online). They are super cheap - like 5 for \$10, easy to clean, and plus they come in adorable prints. :) I read that you should get a heating pad for them but they tended not to sleep on it and since I don't keep my house too cold, it wasn't really needed.

Oh and LOTS of paper towels!!

I was also kind of a nervous nelly when it came to their health and since I'm not a vet the only way I could tell that they were healthy was to weigh them. (This might have been overkill though). I got a little food scale with a basket and weighed them every day for a while and then every couple of days to make sure that they were gaining weight. They gained almost an ounce a day pretty consistently.

One thing I kept seeing on puppy raising websites as a tip, was to clip their toenails. Since they are sooo tiny, a regular dog clipper won't work but since I have cats I had a cat toe nail clipper that worked great. They recommend this because when they are nursing they are digging their paws into the mom and this can hurt her. I did this once a week and since they were so little they didn't seem to mind. (I wish I had actually started this when my dog was a puppy because he HATES getting his nails clipped now!)





As far as feeding, once she started to seem somewhat annoyed at nursing - about 3 to 4 weeks, we started them on puppy food - a blender is definitely necessary for this. The first time I tried it I blended it up with some luke warm water and they seemed somewhat uninterested. Then my boyfriend microwaved some water and blended it up so it was really warm and they took to it immediately!! This is the time that started feeding Sweet Pea dried food. She liked to eat the puppy mush though too so just try to be aware if the mom is eating all the food that was meant for the pups. And as far as water, I was concerned because for a while they were just nursing and eating the mush and didn't go near the water dish. Then just naturally with no reason, they started drinking from the water dish. They were still nursing up until I dropped them off at TLAC but usually Sweet Pea snapped at them if they tried once they were about 6 weeks.

That brings up something that really concerned me and my neighbor said was very normal. After a while, Sweet Pea would growl and grab them by their legs or their head with her mouth and I really thought she was hurting them! But apparently that is the momma dog's way of teaching her pups right from wrong.

At about 4-5 weeks I had removed the baby pool from the room and they just slept on a dog bed all together and put out a few blankets. I also had a futon in the room that Sweet Pea could jump on and the puppies couldn't. She seemed to really like this since at night I still kept her closed in the room with the puppies. She could still keep an eye on them but she was up away from them so that they weren't constantly bugging her for milk. I would suggest having some place that she can sleep that they cannot get to but she can still be with them.

This is also around the time that they understood that the door to the room wasn't the "end" of their world and they wanted to get out and explore. This is when they get fun and very very messy. I let them out to play with me in the living room and there were many accidents. I did not discipline them since they are way too young to understand - just cleaned up their mess. (At this point, the mother dog is done doing that for you!!)



At about 5-6 weeks, I started taking them outside. At first they were kind of terrified - some more than others. And as soon as one would start whining, they all would start - even ones that looked like they were enjoying themselves. After the third time out, it was hard to get them all back inside they LOVED the backyard. Watch out for holes in your fence, or holes underneath sheds or decks because they will definitely want to check those places out. Once you can take them outside you can start on mild house training. I took them out about 5 times a day - once immediately in the morning when I heard them whining at the door, three times during the day, and once before bedtime (around 9PM - this time is kind of arbitrary - I just did this so my cat could come in the house since she wouldn't if the puppies were out of their room.) Surprisingly, they really would rather go to the bathroom outside and would go as soon as I took them out. Though still not disciplining for accidents in the house - that's something I would leave up to their owners once they are adopted.

At this point, my dog Ferris had become buds with Sweet Pea when the puppies weren't around. She was spending less and less time with them - wanting to take a nap with me or using the dog door to hang out outside by herself or with Ferris. If she is outside by herself, make sure your fence is really sound. I never witnessed this but my neighbor told me that a few times stray male dogs came sniffing around the fence and Ferris barked at them until they went away. Since she isn't spayed, apparently she will still attract unwanted male attention. As far as Ferris, I'm not sure if I created a situation where he was jealous of the puppies or if this is the way cranky old men dogs act around puppies, but they were REALLY interested in him and he didn't like it. They would follow him around and he would turn towards them and they would immediately sink to the grass and belly crawl towards him. He'd make this weird growl and snap at them but never ever

bit them. I would just keep an eye out if you have an older male dog just to make sure he doesn't take it too far. The puppies, I guess, thought he was playing because they never learned to leave him alone.



At about 7 weeks, they learned to use the dog door and my life for about a week was spent counting to 7 to make sure all of the puppies were constantly accounted for. I had gotten different colored collars for each of them so that made it easier to know from a distance which puppies were which. Obviously, if I ever left the house, the puppies were put in their room. At this point, they were also eating regular puppy food without being blended. (I bought the big bag of Fromm's Puppy Gold in the pink bag from Bark n Purr which they liked). This is also the point where I started posting on Craigslist which I actually have some advice about as well. I tried to post one post for each puppy and craigslist thought I was spamming so would only let me post three of the puppies listings. (This was the first time I ever posted something to craigslist so that might be common knowledge). Also, I posted that I would send and take applications, this kind of turned into a mess. I would recommend that you direct people to the shelter to fill out their applications where they can take the ID number posted in your craigslist ad and put it on the application and let the shelter deal with approving applications.

At 8 weeks, I got them all together and dropped them off. They were getting spayed and neutered and microchipped at the shelter and their new adoptive parents were picking them up after their surgeries. It was a really tough goodbye after loving and caring for them for so long but I'm trying to stay in touch with the adopters so I can get updates on how the whole family is doing!

