

Neonatal Care for Orphaned Puppies

By Sherry Woodard

Raising orphaned puppies can be very rewarding. It is, however, a serious responsibility that requires some time, money and work on your part if you want to help the little ones grow up healthy. Close observation and prompt attention if any problems develop are especially important. If you have not raised orphans before, you should have a veterinarian look the babies over before you get started. Don't be disappointed if you are unable to save all the orphan puppies; you can only give it your best effort.



Basic Medical Care

What are the medical concerns when raising orphaned puppies? Here's some basic information about what's normal and what's not:

Temperature. A normal rectal temperature for a newborn puppy is 95 to 99 degrees Fahrenheit for the first week, and 97 to 100 for the second week. By the fourth week, the puppy's temperature should reach the normal temperature of an adult dog – 100 to 102 degrees.

Weight. Weighing the puppies daily to check for weight gain can reassure you that they are doing well. If a puppy is losing weight, you should consult with your veterinarian.

Dehydration. The lack of normal parental care may mean that you receive puppies who are dehydrated. They may also become dehydrated by being chilled – newborns can't nurse if they are too cold, because their energy is spent trying to stay warm. One sign of dehydration is loss of elasticity in the skin. If you pick up the pup's scruff with two fingers, it will stay up, looking pinched. Another way to test for dehydration is to look at the puppy's gums (mucous membranes). The gums should be moist and shiny; if you touch them, they should not be sticky.

Hypoglycemia. Hypoglycemia, an abnormal decrease of sugar in the blood, can also happen to orphaned puppies. The signs to look for are lack of strength, lack of movement, and muscle twitching (sometimes with convulsions). If a puppy shows signs of hypoglycemia, you can place a few drops of corn syrup under his or her tongue before calling your veterinarian for further assistance.

Warmth. A puppy burns far more body heat per pound of body weight than an adult dog. To stay warm, puppies depend on radiant heat from their mother. In her absence, they need constant temperature control. So, provide your puppies with a draft-free nesting area. Heat lamps or hot water bottles can be used to keep the temperature up.

During the first four or five days of life, puppies should be kept in an environment that is between 85 and 90 degrees. The temperature may gradually be decreased to 80 degrees by the seventh to tenth day, and may be reduced to 72 degrees by the end of the fourth week. Warm and cool the puppies gradually. If you have a large litter, they will huddle together, which means they won't require as much help with heat from you. Don't overheat the puppies – newborns cannot move away from the heat on their own.

Stimulation for elimination. For the first two weeks of life, puppies are stimulated by their mother to encourage urination and defecation. In the absence of their mother, you will have to provide the stimulation. Massage your puppies' genital area with a moist cloth to stimulate bladder and bowel action. After two weeks, puppies should urinate and defecate on their own. Watch them carefully to make sure that happens.

Internal parasites. If your puppies are developing very slowly or have blood in their stool, they may have an infestation of internal parasites. A stool sample should be taken to your veterinarian for examination.

Vision. Puppies' eyes open when they are 10 to 14 days old. Because their eyes are very sensitive to light, they should be kept out of direct sunlight until approximately four weeks of age.

Getting Started

Living space. If the puppies were being cared for by their mother, she would choose a place that is soft, warm and away from full sunlight. In the absence of their mother, you must provide this type of environment. A box may be large enough for a first home for the family. Put the box in a warm, sheltered space. (See the section above on temperature.) If the litter is a big one, you may need to buy a child-size plastic pool. As the puppies grow, watch to see whether they can climb out of the box or pool. Once puppies start to move, they can climb well within a surprisingly short period of time.

Bedding. Use clean newspaper for the first week or so. Newborn puppies can get caught up in soft cloth and can die if they can't breathe. After they are able to lift their heads and move around a bit, you can use a sheet or blanket. Sheets or blankets purchased from a thrift store are inexpensive and easy to wash. They work great when folded and rolled into a nice bed. When your puppies start crawling, and then walking, they'll use the cloth for traction.

Disease prevention. Puppies are very vulnerable to disease, so disease prevention is needed around the clock. Create a bleach bath to walk through before entering the area where they are kept. The "bath" can be a cat litter tray with an old towel in the bottom. Add a light (30 to 1) mixture of bleach and water to moisten, but not cover, the towel. This method will disinfect your shoes without soaking them or the floors. Always wash your hands before touching the puppies. If you work with other animals or visit shelters or dog parks (anyplace where you come into contact with other dogs), changing your clothes before handling the puppies is recommended.

Feeding. Newborns will need food every three hours, around the clock. Six or eight meals, equally spaced over 24 hours, are sufficient for most puppies; small or weak puppies may need more feedings.

You can give your orphans complete nutrition by buying a commercial puppy milk replacer (such as Esbilac), which can be purchased through your veterinarian or a pet supply store. Commercial milk replacers have feeding directions on the label. In an emergency, you can feed puppies the following recipe, but only use it short-term, until a milk replacer can be purchased:

1 cup whole milk	1 pinch salt
1 tablespoon corn oil	3 egg yolks (no whites)

Blend the mixture well and warm it to 95 to 100 degrees. Test it on your forearm – the milk should feel slightly warmer than your skin. When the puppies are two and a half weeks old, you can start feeding them milk replacer at room temperature.

There are various methods of feeding orphan puppies. You can use an ordinary eyedropper, but commercial animal baby bottles can also be purchased. Puppies do not have a well-developed gag reflex, so you must be very careful not to drown the puppy while feeding him or her. The size of the hole in the nipple is crucial. If you turn the bottle upside down and the milk drips freely, the hole is too large. The bottle should need a light squeeze for milk to drip out. If you need to enlarge the hole, you can heat a needle with a lighter and apply it to the hole.

Tube-feeding is the easiest, cleanest and most efficient method of hand-feeding newborns. To tube-feed, you will need to purchase supplies from your veterinarian and have a lesson in the technique used to prevent milk replacer from getting into the puppy's lungs. Hand-feeding can generally be ended during the third week.

Nail trimming. The puppies will need nail trims often, so if you have not trimmed toenails on dogs, ask someone to show you how to do it safely. Human nail clippers work well on small puppies.

Visitors. You should limit the number of visitors and the number of people who handle the pups until the puppies are a few weeks old. Use caution – gentle handling and disease control will continue to be concerns for many weeks.

As the Puppies Grow

Visits to the vet. During the puppies' third week, a visit to your veterinarian for a checkup is a good idea. The puppies' eyes are still sensitive at this stage, so don't expose them to direct sunlight on this first outing. Ask your veterinarian about diet, deworming and vaccinations. You should also talk to the vet about spay/neuter, since this procedure should be done before the puppies leave your care. (Spay/neuter can be done as early as eight weeks; the puppies must weigh at least two pounds.) The vet may want to evaluate each puppy and start individual records for their future human families. Yes, they are growing up!

Weaning puppies to gruel. During the third week, begin offering the puppies a water dish, one that is not too large, since they may attempt to climb in instead of drinking from it. Then, introduce the puppies to gruel. Make a gruel by blending a good-quality dry puppy food with commercial milk replacer. Put the gruel, warm and not too thick, in a low pan. As the puppies discover how to lap the gruel, you can gradually thicken the mixture. By five weeks of age, most puppies can eat a diet of dry puppy food. Don't forget to give them a constant supply of fresh water.

Socialization. In your role of dog parent, you will have the challenge of safely socializing these pups to other canines and the rest of the world. They have much to learn – things that mom would normally teach them. Invite fully vaccinated dog guests over to visit, and introduce the puppies to cats as well. Be careful to protect the puppies from any harm, however – not all other animals like puppies.

When children visit, supervision is absolutely necessary. Puppies scratch and bite; children sometimes get too rough in their handling of them. Both children and puppies can benefit from learning proper manners required in human/animal relationships. The puppies should also encounter men, women, raincoats, hats, glasses – anything you can think of that is commonplace out in the world. To prevent them from becoming fearful of noises, you can play thunderstorm sounds, run the vacuum, and turn on the TV for background noise. If they are comfortable hearing many different sounds as puppies, there will be less to fear later on.

Finding homes for the puppies. Please try to place the puppies in homes where they will be considered valued family members. Emphasize the social needs of dogs and recommend to the puppy's new family that they invest in some training as the puppy gets older.

Sherry Woodard is the dog training and care consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends' No More Homeless Pets mission.

See also: Puppy Development
Routine Veterinary Care for Your Dog