

Why do Bitches Fail to Conceive?

*Original article was written by Kathy Stewart and published in the Jan. 1994 issue of DOGS in CANADA magazine.
Revised Jan. 2000.*

Why do bitches fail to conceive? The main reason is that the female was bred at the wrong time. Perhaps breeders are missing the obvious signs. Many people believe that the female should be bred 8 to 14 days after she begins showing blood-tinged vaginal discharge. As a breeder you must determine which days are best to breed your particular bitch? Here are some signs that you should watch for:

* The vulva of your female will enlarge and become quite hard in the period leading up to the time during which the bitch will allow mating. The time to begin breeding is once the vulva begins to soften.

* The colour of discharge can also be an indicator. It may change from dark red to a very light pink or straw colour, or may disappear all together about the time that breeding should begin. Some females bleed right through their cycle, so this should not be the only indicator.

* Many females will show that they are ready to be bred, by flirting -- throwing their hind quarters towards dogs that are present, thereby encouraging the males to mount them.

* Many bitches will flag when the acceptance period begins -- that is, they will move their tail off to the side. This behaviour is seen when the area above the vulva and below the anus is touched. At the same time the vulva will be elevated to the position needed at mating time.

Often people mistakenly believe that the first day that the female stands is the first day that she should be bred. Females will frequently stand 6 days before they actually ovulate. Conception usually takes place 2 to 6 days after ovulation. The sperm can reach the eggs as early as 20 minutes after copulation began. So you can see that breeding the bitch on the first day that she will stand, is not the wisest thing to do, as the sperm may or may not survive more than 7 - 8 days. It is important to remember that every bitch's cycle is different. Therefore optimum breeding days will vary.

Some people believe that more females will be produced if the breedings are done early, and more males will result if the breedings are done later, after ovulation. This is thought to be because the male sperm is smaller, moves quicker and has a short life span. Female sperm are larger, slower and survive longer. Others believe that the sexes can be altered by changing the pH of the vagina. Regardless, it is important to remember that our main objective is to produce a litter, not alter the sexes.

If you are having trouble with your breedings, help is available. Your vet should be able to examine a vaginal smear under a microscope to determine if the heat cycle is normal, when breeding should begin, if your female has an infection, and whether or not sperm is present. Unfortunately, this test cannot tell you the optimum time to breed. Blood tests are available at most clinics which can better tell you the time of ovulation and hence the correct time to breed.

I cannot stress enough the importance of keeping accurate records -- noting behaviour patterns, dates (in season, breeding and whelping), etc.. The answer to breeding problems lies within.

Kathy Stewart