



Free-Whelping After a C-Section

Performing a C-section does not necessarily prohibit future free-whelping.

By Jeff Grognet, DVM

Your bitch had a cesarean section last year, and you'd like to breed her again this year. Assuming everything goes well and she conceives, you are now plagued with thoughts about the whelping: Should you let her free-whelp, or should you plan a cesarean?

This is a question many breeders face. According to Dr. Corry van der Ende, a veterinarian specializing in canine reproduction and a member of the Society of Theriogenologists, it all comes down to why the bitch had a cesarean in the first place—

why couldn't she whelp on her own?

When asked for the main reason bitches have cesareans, Van der Ende suggests that the most common motivation is the owner, not the inability of the bitch to whelp. In many cases, owners become anxious with a protracted first stage of labor. They get nervous and then want a cesarean done.

The other side of the equation is the veterinarian. Faced with the prospect of repeated phone calls from a panicky client, the doctor may decide to do a cesarean and resolve the problem in an hour or two.

Van der Ende goes on to say that every mating should include good ovulation timing. By doing this, the breeder can pin down the exact due date for whelping, reducing much of the anxiety. The bitch could then go on to free-whelp. Side benefits include eliminating potential complications from surgery and avoiding expensive veterinary bills.

Her summary is this: If a bitch has had a cesarean one time, it does not necessarily follow that she would require a cesarean section with each subsequent pregnancy.

If the bitch had complications that forced a cesarean last time, what then? For example, she might have sustained an injury to her pelvis, which caused narrowing of her birth canal. In this case, a cesarean is likely indicated each time she comes due to whelp.

Or, the whelping mother might have had disproportionately large pups that would not pass naturally through her birth canal. Singleton litters are a major cause of large pups. Alternatively, excessively large litters can cause overstretching of the uterus, leading to primary inertia and lack of uterine contractions. This could necessitate a cesarean. If these conditions recurred, the bitch might need another cesarean, but this can't be decided until it is whelping time.

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what to look for

Most bitches are able to successfully free-whelp following a C-section litter, but certain complications are more likely to require a cesarean again. Consult your veterinarian to determine the bitch's capability of free-whelping in situations such as:

- Prior injury to the bitch's pelvis
- Disproportionately large puppies
- Singleton litter
- Excessively large litter

The other concern is that if a bitch had a cesarean, is she more susceptible to complications?

One complication often touted is rupture of the uterus at the cesarean site. In more than 32 years of practice, Van der Ende has not seen such a rupture.

She has seen the uterus torn in other places, but not where the surgical incision was made.

Incisions in the uterus are routinely made in the body of the uterus. The puppy only enters this area during the birthing process and is there for only a short period of time before it is expelled. As well, the scar tissue that builds up on an incision site is often stronger than the original tissue. It doesn't make sense that it would rupture there.

What does Van der Ende recommend when breeders want to whelp bitches who have undergone a cesarean? She suggests treating it like a normal whelping, which means monitoring the bitch closely using repeated body temperatures, checking for abnormal vaginal discharge, and knowing the exact due date from ovulation timing. The bitch is just as capable of free-whelping this time around as if she never had a cesarean previously.

Van der Ende stresses that you should give bitches sufficient time to whelp and don't be in a hurry. One way to settle your mind is to monitor the pups. A commercial service that can allow you to do this is WhelpWise (whelpwise.com). This service utilizes monitors that track contractions in the uterus as well as puppy heart rates. This tells you when (or if) it is time to do a cesarean.

Breeders can use puppy heart rates to indicate whether the pups are stressed or doing OK. Puppy heart rates should be significantly higher than that of the mother. This can be tracked with a Doppler or a stethoscope. In the first case, it is usually done by the veterinarian, but breeders can learn how to listen with stethoscopes to monitor their bitches. 

Jeff Grognet is a veterinarian with a practice in British Columbia, Canada, and is a regular AKC FAMILY DOG contributor.

