

Jolene has two dogs, Jake and Penelope. They are both boxers and are brother and sister. Jolene had been meaning to have both Jake and Penelope neutered, but time seemed to get away from her and Penelope had her first estrus cycle, much to the pleasure of Jake. This hormonal bliss led to Penelope becoming pregnant or at least apparently so. Jolene reports Penelope has obviously grown in the midsection and over the past week or so seems to be gaining more rapidly and eating more as well. Her concerns are centered around the fact that Jake and Penelope are brother and sister and wondered if that could lead to an increase in possible birth defects. She also wanted to know what she should be doing to help Penelope during her pregnancy. At the time of her letter, Penelope was six weeks along. She is now eight weeks and counting. The gestation period in dogs is classically considered to be 63 days, although this is a give or take number.

Without question, there is an increased risk for genetic problems when brother and sister breed. Instead of a dilution in genetics, the opposite occurs. And with this concentration of like genes, there is more of a chance for defects to be expressed in their offspring.

Realize that there is also a good chance there will be no apparent problems with the puppies, but the risk is there and breeding two dogs with similar genetics should be avoided.

As for Penelope and her impending motherhood, I do have a few suggestions for both prenatal and postnatal care. My first deals with nutrition.

I usually recommend that pregnant dogs receive a more calorically dense food than their regular diet. A puppy food is usually adequate. It is best to use a puppy formula from the same manufacturer in order to avoid any major changes in ingredients in the diet. This can lead to digestive upset with possible vomiting and/or diarrhea.

It is also a good idea to provide a quiet comfortable place for Penelope to have her puppies. People are generally inclined to try to participate during their dog's whelping, but I would discourage that plan. It is best to observe from a distance. Since this is Penelope's first pregnancy and from her first estrus cycle, there is an increased chance of complications. However, the chances for an uneventful whelping are far greater than the chance for problems.

Penelope should visit her veterinarian before whelping to have a physical examination, and I also recommend an ultrasound and sometimes radiographs to allow for assessment of the fetuses. Radiology provides an accurate count of the babies after about day 45 of the pregnancy, and the ultrasound allows us to check the fetuses for heartbeats. Armed with this information, Jolene can observe Penelope whelping and know when she is done. I also like to try to have the caretakers count the placentas, sometimes called after birth, to make sure there is one placenta that comes out with each puppy. If they are retained inside the uterus, they can cause severe infection. This can sometimes be a challenge because the mother most often eats the placentas after they are produced.

After the puppies are born, it is important to make sure Penelope is showing interest in her puppies. She should clean the puppies with her tongue to help stimulate them to breathe and allow them to nurse very soon after being born. I would continue to feed Penelope a puppy formulation until the pups are weaned, which should occur around six weeks or so.

I hope all goes well for Penelope and her impending motherhood. By my count, she is due very soon.