



# Caring for Your Litter - Weeks 6-8

Weeks 6 to 8 are generally a very busy time for breeders. The pups are becoming much more independent and mobile. They are now eating solid foods, and only occasionally suckling from their mother. They sleep less and are far more active and inquisitive. You will spend a large part of every day feeding, cleaning and providing learning and socialisation opportunities for the litter – both as a whole and individually.

You will also be starting to prepare for the day they will leave their mother and littermates and head to their new homes. There will be a very important veterinary visit for vaccination and microchipping, and the new owners will be visiting or contacting you regularly for updates. You will be assessing your litter, making some decisions about which pup or pups you plan to keep, and matching the remaining pups to their new homes.

## Developmental milestones

From 6 to 8 weeks, the pups will continue to grow and become more and more coordinated as their nervous systems develop. Play between pups becomes rougher and noisier, and you will see the various pup's characters are really beginning to develop.

Although every mother is different, generally the amount of contact time with the pups will be decreasing. You may also notice that your bitch is starting to set rules and boundaries in regards to the pup's behaviour, telling them off if they start getting out of line.

By around the eighth week, the pups will have a full set of puppy teeth. They will be already be using these teeth on everything as they begin to learn the all important skill of 'bite inhibition'. You may also see the first signs of a fear response – possibly to everyday objects or experiences. This is perfectly normal – there is a 'fear period' that occurs around 8 to 11 weeks which is part of normal development.

## Housing considerations

Your litter will now be spending more and more time each day exploring their world, playing and interacting with each other. Although puppies continue to sleep a lot of the day, the awake and active times will be becoming longer.

The amount of space they require will be increasing, both due to their size and the need for different areas for toileting, eating, sleeping and exploration. Generally, the litter will be 'locked in' at night (both for their own safety, but also to encourage them to get into a routine of sleeping at night) and allowed out during the day into a safe area.

The housing area needs to have protection from all kinds of weather, along with a warm raised bed. The need for an external heat source is diminishing (unless the weather is particularly cold) now that the pups can better regulate their own temperature.

The pup's outdoor area needs to be safe from potential hazards and securely fenced. There will need to be clean, fresh water available both 'inside' and 'outside' in appropriately sized dishes or bowls. Water dishes must be mounted so that the pups cannot tip them, and there is no risk of them falling in and drowning.

You will be feeding the pups 3 to 4 meals each day. This can be a very messy event, so most breeders prefer to have a dedicated place or area for feeding that is easy to clean. Pups can continue to share a feed dish. Still, you may find that having several dishes, or even individual bowls for each pup can help prevent the bigger, bossy pups from stealing everyone else's food.

Your puppy area will need to have a toileting area, and you will need to keep this super clean. It is amazing how much poop a litter of pups can generate in a day! By now the pups should be moving away from their bed and toileting outdoors, or onto a suitable substrate provided for toileting inside. They still cannot 'hang on' for very long, but you should see bladder and bowel control improving as they mature.



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## Caring for your bitch – weeks 6-8

The physical demands on the mother of the litter are now starting to decrease. The weaning process will be well underway, and your bitch may be spending less and less time in with her pups. As the pups transition onto solid foods, milk production will begin to start decreasing.

During your daily health checks, you will need to watch that your bitch's teats do not become too engorged with milk. This is both uncomfortable for her and can increase the risks of mastitis developing. If the teats seem hard or a little uncomfortable, you can encourage the pups to have a small feed, or gently express a little milk to reduce the pressure.

Weaning should be gradual, allowing the bitch's milk production to taper off naturally and allow the pups to transition to eating solid foods. The weaning process also includes important learning events for the pups – the bitch will begin teaching the pups that access to the teats is not always allowed. There will be times where she moves away or even tells pups off as they go to suckle.

She will also provide feedback if they suckle too roughly, so you might see her discipline a single pup whilst others are allowed to continue to feed. This is normal. Puppies are great actors; they will scream and cry like they have suffered a horrific injury when often all that has happened is the bitch has growled at them. There is no need to step in unless you can see a pup is truly getting hurt. These are essential life lessons about manners and appropriate behaviour the pups need to experience.

### **Important!**

*You should never 'force wean' the pups by totally removing access to their mother unless instructed to do so by your veterinarian for medical reasons. Suddenly or prematurely removing the mother has consequences for both the pups and the bitch and can lead to ongoing behavioural and medical issues.*

As her milk production starts to decrease, her nutritional requirements will also begin to ease off. For most bitches, now is the time to start reducing the amount of food she is eating so that she does not put on excess weight. If your bitch has lost weight, now is the time that she can start to recover.

You will need to assess her body condition each day and feed her accordingly. Generally, she should start returning to two meals a day. If you changed her diet to a more calorie dense food during pregnancy and lactation, gradually transition her back to her regular food.

As you feed the pups or give them access to treats, you will need to watch that your bitch does not try to resource guard any food items. Although many bitches are happy to share, some will become very possessive of high value items. If you are tapering her daily intake of food, she may be a little more hungry than usual, so be prepared for her to behave differently.

Your bitch's daily routine will begin to return to her pre-litter 'normal'. She may spend a large part of her day with the family or with other pets, visiting her pups a number of times a day. She will also need time away from the pups to exercise and play, and you can gradually work on returning her to her normal level of fitness.

### **Important!**

*It is a requirement that your bitch undergoes a 'post partum' health check by a veterinarian (DV Regulation 20.8.3). Your vet may refer to this as a post-whelping check.*

*For many breeders, this will take place in the 24 to 48 hours after the birth, but if you have not yet had this done, it can be scheduled to occur at the same time as the puppies have their 6 week health check and vaccination.*

*Dogs Victoria has a template '[Post Whelping Veterinary Certificate form](#)' that you can print out and take with you for your veterinarian to complete and sign. Details of this health check need to be kept as part of your bitch's records.*



# Caring for Your Litter - Weeks 6-8

## Caring for your puppies – weeks 6-8

You will need to continue to give every puppy a full 'all over' health check every day. You will be looking for any scratches or wounds (often caused by their littermates during feeding time or rough play), and checking everything looks normal from head to tail. If your pups are wearing ID collars, you need to check they are secure and not too tight as the pups may be growing so quickly that adjustments are needed almost daily.

You should continue to trim your puppy's toenails as required – you will be amazed at how quickly they grow! Trimming the toenails helps prevent injuries to your bitch's teats and other pups in the litter and also promotes proper growth and development of the feet.

The pups should now be offered meals 3 to 4 times a day. Although the first meals will usually be sloppy or softened food, you can gradually transition them to food that requires some chewing. By 6 to 8 weeks of age, they should be able to eat dry kibble and chew on raw bones or other chew items designed for puppies.

Chewing, mouthing, and gnawing are all important activities for pups. You will find that they put pretty much everything in their mouth during this period. You need to make sure that they cannot access anything dangerous to eat or chew. You can also encourage 'appropriate' oral behaviours by providing safe chew items – both edible and non edible – and maintaining their interest by rotating or changing them often.



Providing opportunities for oral exploration can be simple and doesn't require expensive high end toys. You are aiming to provide a variety of textures and shapes and a variety of food items that require chewing. This can be achieved by crafting chew items from safe objects found in a typical household, using toys specifically designed for chewing and offering various chewy foods and treats that are safe for pups.

### **Important!**

*Whenever you make changes to the pup's diet, you may find that their droppings become a little loose. Changes can include the addition of novel chew items such as raw bones, commercial chews or treats.*

*If the pups droppings remain very loose, contain any signs of blood, or the pups seem uncomfortable when toileting, you should consult your veterinarian for advice immediately.*

## Health care

Aside from your daily health checks for both the mother of the litter and each pup, there are a few important health care milestones during this period.

Both your bitch and the pups will require worming when the pups reach six weeks, and again at eight weeks of age. Generally, at this point, worming will involve dosing with a tablet, and each individual's weight will be used to calculate the correct dose. Your vet will be able to advise you on the best product to use now the pups are bigger.

### **Important!**

*Ensure you record the product used and the dose given for each animal every time you worm them – both the pups and your adult dogs.*

Generally, at six weeks of age, the pups will undergo their first formal veterinary health check. Your veterinarian will examine each pup thoroughly and provide you with a signed veterinary health certificate that you need to keep with each pup's records.



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You want to keep this first vet visit very positive, so try to book a time with your vet where they are not super busy, and take plenty of treats with you. Most vet clinics these days are very aware of the need for positive associations, and their staff will go out of their way to ensure your pups have a pleasant experience.

If your veterinarian notes any health issues, you will need to discuss whether these are likely to impact the pup moving forward, and document them on the puppy health check paperwork. Some things may be noted that will resolve with time or not impact the pup's future health, but if there are more serious issues picked up at this visit, you will need to disclose them to any potential homes.

## **Important!**

*Dogs Victoria has a template '[Puppy Health Check Certificate](#)' that you can print out and take with you to this visit. Many vets have their own version, but the Dogs Victoria template can be used to ensure you meet your record keeping requirements if they don't.*

At this visit, each pup will receive its first dose of vaccine. This is usually a single injection covering the three 'core' diseases that can kill young pups – Distemper, Parvovirus and Hepatitis.

Your veterinarian will provide each pup with a vaccination certificate that will clearly show which vaccine was used, and when the next dose is due (usually when the pups are 10 to 12 weeks of age). The vaccination certificate will need to be provided to the new owner with the puppy's documentation and health records.

## **Note:**

*Dogs Victoria has a [Fact Sheet](#) that explains vaccination and immunity to disease in more detail but, as always, consult your veterinarian for advice on appropriate vaccination protocols for your particular situation, location and risk level.*



In most cases, the pups will also be implanted with a microchip at this visit. The microchip is placed under the skin in between the pup's shoulder blades. It will remain there throughout life, providing an identifier that can be scanned with a special reader.

Microchips are tiny – about the size of a grain of rice – and each chip holds a unique 15 digit number. The number is paired with information, such as owner contact details, on a central registry database.

In Victoria, all pups must be identified with a microchip prior to sale (even if given away). The microchip number also forms part of the Dogs Victoria Litter Registration process. Only certain people are permitted to implant microchips. The **Domestic Animals Act** has an entire section relating to microchipping, the recording of 'prescribed information' and the management of microchip registry databases.

Microchipping not only provides each animal with a unique identifier, they are used to reunite lost animals with their owners, resolve ownership disputes, and to identify individual animals for the purposes of health testing.

At the time of microchipping, you will need to provide all of your details as the pups' owner. You will also need to provide your 'Source Number' allocated by the Victorian Government Pet Exchange Register. Your veterinarian (or authorised implanter) will then send details of the microchips implanted and all of the implantation and ownership information required to a licensed 'Domestic Animals Registry' for inclusion on their database.



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You will receive confirmation that the pups have been added to the database directly from the registry (usually about a week after the implantation occurs). You will also be provided with 'Change of Ownership' forms for each pup so that once the pups move to their new homes, the information held on the database can be updated to reflect the new owner.

## The continuing importance of socialisation

The socialisation period is now in full swing. The experiences that your pups have now will shape their adult character and prepare them for living in modern day society.

You will already have been working to provide plenty of positive experiences – handling, grooming, novel items and experiences, toys and play. Still, you will be looking to expand this further as the pups continue learning and growing.

Now they are more active and coordinated, you can introduce more complex activities and items. In their pen or in the yard, there might be things to climb on, through or under, surfaces that are a little unstable or slippery to walk on. Items that move or make unusual noises.

The pups are now old enough to begin some basic training using positive reinforcement techniques. To do this, you may want to work with each pup individually. However, nothing is stopping you (or your family and visitors) all using treats to reward desired behaviours in the presence of the other pups.

You can start with some basic manners training such as coaching polite greeting behaviours, teaching 'sit', 'drop' and 'coming when called' or even walking on a leash. Allowing gentle restraint, physical examination and grooming should also be high on the list of behaviours to reinforce.

If your breed is one used for a specific activity, such as hunting or herding, you may want to start with some basics that encourage those innate behaviours. If you have plans to compete in conformation showing or dog sports, now is the time to establish the positive associations and lay down the building blocks for future training.

All of your puppies can have a little 'alone time' – brief sessions away from their mother and littermates. You can introduce a 'crate' (a pen or cage with a soft bed and some toys in it) and get pups used to short periods of confinement in preparation for car travel, trips to the vet, and for providing a safe and familiar space in their new home.

Any behaviours or experiences that will assist with the transition into their new home, and being away from their littermates can help set puppies up for success and decrease the stress of moving to a new home.

## Important!

*Dogs Victoria has a [Fact Sheet](#) on Crate Training for both dogs and puppies. A crate can provide a safe space within the home, assist with early toilet training, and assist with travel, transport, and vet visits. You can download a copy from the Dogs Victoria website. You may also want to include it in your puppy pack information for new owners.*



Your puppies should continue to meet and interact with a large variety of people, especially well behaved children. Now is the time to have everyone come and visit – new puppy owners, neighbours, and the kid's friends. If you don't have children yourself, you should look to inviting family and friends who have children to visit your litter. Of course, all interactions need to be supervised, and all children need coaching on how to play with and handle the pups appropriately.



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If your puppy pen/enclosure is now outside in a garage, kennel or shed, your pups still need to experience a busy household and the noises and smells associated with it. If they are inside the house most of the day, they need to experience the garage or shed.

The opportunities for socialisation, training and enrichment activities are endless and a little researching on the internet, through your mentors, or breed clubs should give you plenty of ideas.

Remember, all experiences need to be positive, and you should not overwhelm the pups with too many activities. They still need time to sleep, and time to play with their littermates or interact with their mother.

Remember negative experiences at this age can have quite significant impacts, just as lack of experiences can.

