

## Fact Sheet: Oestrus and mating

Puberty, or sexual maturity in the bitch, usually occurs around six months of age although this varies. The smaller breeds tend to mature earlier and some bitches can have their first heat (oestrus) as early as four months. Giant breeds can be two years old before they come into heat for the first time. On average bitches come into season twice a year, but this can vary. Small breeds tend to cycle more frequently than larger breeds, with some toy breeds having three to four seasons a year. Large breeds may only cycle every 12-18 months.

From beginning to end allow at least three weeks for a bitch's season to last. Heat should be considered to begin with the first signs of discharge and the bitch paying attention to her vulva, which will appear swollen. You may also find the bitch is passing small quantities of urine more frequently. This is her way of advertising to any interested males that she will soon be ready for mating. From the beginning of the heat period she will be attractive to male dogs but does not usually allow mating until about 7-10 days later. At this stage the discharge will be less bloodstained. The heat cycle will end when all discharge ceases and the vulva has returned to normal size.

Knowing the best time to mate the bitch can be difficult. Some bitches ovulate either early or late during the heat period. Most bitches ovulate and are receptive from around the 11<sup>th</sup> day, and the discharge will be less bloody, and the bitch will also be actively looking for a mate!

At the practice we have in-house progesterone testing available, which will measure the amount of the hormone progesterone in your dog's bloodstream. Please call us to book. Testing this will help to give an indication of when your bitch will be ready for mating. Such tests are very useful for bitches that have a history of unsuccessful matings, or for breeding bitches that have to travel some distance to the stud or are intending to be artificially inseminated. The timing of mating is extremely critical, and it is for this reason that it is worthwhile having tests carried out at the practice. For most bitches the most fertile time is between the 10<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> day of oestrus. Some bitches ovulate as early as the third or fourth, or as late as the 18<sup>th</sup> day. Blood tests will give an indication regarding this. Please contact us when your dog has started her season if you are interested in progesterone testing, and one of our vets will be able to advise when to start testing.

Male dogs appear to be more stress sensitive than bitches, thus successful matings are more common when the dog is in its own environment. It is for this reason that bitches are usually taken to the stud dog. It is also quite usual to arrange for two matings for your bitch, often 24 to 48 hours apart.

The genital anatomy of the dogs and bitch is such that during coitus part of the dog's penis (the bulbis glandis) enlarges and is held firmly by the muscles of the vagina which contracts, thus preventing the penis from being withdrawn. This is the tie that is considered a desirable feature for a

successful mating (although pregnancy can still occur without a tie). Once tied the dog will often step over the bitch or be turned by handlers into a position that the animals are back to back.

In the case of an accidental mating, there is little point in trying to separate animals that are locked (or 'tied') together. Buckets of cold water, water pistols, etc. do little to speed up the process of separation and merely upset the animals. You can cause serious injury if you try to pull two tied dogs apart. If a mismating has occurred, please contact us. 'Morning after' injections are available to prevent pregnancy.