

PHANTOM PREGNANCY IN DOGS

What is a phantom pregnancy?

A phantom pregnancy, also known as a false pregnancy or pseudopregnancy, is a condition that can develop in an entire female dog a few weeks after being in season. It is a relatively common occurrence because regardless of whether she has been mated or not, the hormones (such as progesterone and prolactin) produced following a season will be almost the same. This results in maternal behaviours and physical changes that mimic pregnancy.

What are the symptoms of a phantom pregnancy?

The signs usually occur 6-8 weeks after a season and last 2-3 weeks, but this can vary.

Signs include:

- Swollen mammary glands
- Milk production.
- Excessive licking of the belly.
- Nesting behaviours.
- Collecting and mothering soft toys.
- Low energy.
- Reduced appetite.
- Increased drinking and urination.
- Vomiting and diarrhoea.
- Mastitis.
- Anxious or aggressive behaviour.

What are the management options for a phantom pregnancy?

Most dogs with a phantom pregnancy have mild signs that resolve after 2-3 weeks without any intervention.

You can support your dog to encourage the phantom pregnancy to come to an end:

- Preventing your dog licking their belly and avoid rubbing the belly as this will stimulate the mammary glands to produce milk. An Elizabethan collar, inflatable collar or recovery suit may be required.
- Remove soft toys and blankets as these can trigger nesting and mothering behaviours. Do this discretely while your dog is distracted to prevent.
- Distract with exercise, training, playing and owner interaction.

If the symptoms are severe, persistent or you are noticing behavioural issues like anxiety and aggression, intervention with a drug called cabergoline can be required. Cabergoline is a hormonal medication designed to reduce the signs of phantom pregnancy, in particular milk production. It is a liquid medication given once daily for 4-6 days before reassessment, sometimes a second course is needed. As with any medication there can be side effects, but these are rare (0.01-0.1%), they include drowsiness, inappetence and vomiting.

It is always important to assess whether there is a possibility your dog could be pregnant before pursuing treatment for phantom pregnancy.

How can we prevent a phantom pregnancy?

Entire female dogs that suffer with a phantom pregnancy are more likely to develop one every time they have a season so once they have recovered, the best way to prevent a phantom pregnancy is to spay your dog.

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