

# How do I prepare my dogs for breeding?

One area that has consistently been rewarding for me to treat with Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has been reproductive issues. Many of the problems associated with reproductive failures such as failing to conceive, poor sperm quality, failure to ovulate, abortion, persistent vaginal bleeding and poor milk production are all nicely explained through TCM theory.

It is also interesting to note that increasingly humans are recognising the benefit and seeking TCM treatment when they have fertility issues.

So how can we relate TCM theory to canine fertility in a common practical approach?

In TCM theory fertility revolves mainly around having a strong Kidney and good Blood levels. Ovulation and sperm production and quality are related mainly to the strength of the Chinese Kidney and being able to maintain pregnancy and produce milk is related to good Blood levels. This is obviously a simplification just to give you an overview.

However, when I examine dogs that have reproductive issues there are a lot of common themes which include:

Failure to ovulate – It has been my observation that when a bitch fails to ovulate, or has a false cycle, it occurs much more frequently in the colder winter months of the year. In TCM theory the Kidney is at its weakest during winter so from a TCM perspective this is not to be unexpected. There are many Chinese remedies that help “tonify” the kidney, but diet may also play an important part. Diet from a TCM perspective will be covered in another article

Failure to produce milk – Also known as agalactiae, in TCM theory this is related to a deficiency of Blood. There are many signs of Blood deficiency but as they relate to fertility these may include a dry coarse coat, hair falling out (shedding or blowing the coat), brittle nails, a pale tongue colour, timidity, feeling cold, a fine powdery dandruff in the coat and cold ear tips and paws. Again there are many Chinese Herbal preparations that can help with Blood deficiency, but one of the most important treatments is a good diet.

A good diet for dogs to promote Blood production in TCM terms is a high protein diet with good levels of vitamins, particularly vitamin A.

Supplementation with liver, essential fatty acids, fish oils, and the like, would be indicated. It is also important to recognise the fact that protein is best derived from animal sources, that is, meat. Many commercial foods are produced with high protein levels but due to the method and the economics of producing the product, meat is often substituted with plant derived proteins. Domestic dogs have descended from wild pack animals that hunted prey to survive, so from a developmental perspective they are designed to digest animal proteins and not plant proteins. This is one of the cornerstones for dietary therapy in TCM and is a theory of why modern day dogs and cats appear to be suffering more from cancer, allergies and gastrointestinal disturbances.

In terms of preparing both dogs and bitches for sound breeding and trying to prevent poor milk production a good diet is essential. Some dogs will benefit from a more natural diet that includes raw or cooked meat and blended or grated vegetables and fruits.

Poor sperm quality – This topic is a book in itself, but for the purpose of this article I will just keep it brief. Some dogs just have poor quality semen. This appears to be more common in dogs that have a higher inbreeding coefficient, therefore I believe the more line or inbred a dog is the more likelihood there is that there will be fertility issues. Typically this manifests as having a high abnormal sperm morphology count. These dogs need to be looked at on an individual case basis. Often there are simple things that can be done, but sometimes more radical management of the dog at the time of breeding with the female is needed to be able to produce fertile matings.

In dogs, like bitches with false cycles, there appears to be seasonal variation in the quality of the sperm produced. However, unlike a bitch, which seems to have more fertility issues in the colder winter, my experience with dogs is that it can be at any time of the year and varies amongst individuals.

Stress is a common cause of infertility. There are many human studies that have shown oxidative stress affecting fertility. There are many treatments for stress involving medication, diet and lifestyle changes, much the same as humans!

Again the importance of a good, well-balanced diet cannot be over emphasised.

Just not getting in pup – Again this is a very broad topic, but to keep it simple, if you have tried to breed your bitch and have not had success, there are a number of steps that should be followed all the way through to rule out some of the potential causes. (Refer to articles “AI Is The Best Way To Breed” and “Hormone levels in a brood bitch”)

The two most common causes have already been covered

- Not mating when the bitch’s eggs are ready to be fertilised, either by her not ovulating or the breeding not being timed properly
- The dog is not producing enough viable sperm to fertilise the eggs.

There will be a lot of information in subsequent articles to help guide you through these issues.

Persistent vaginal bleeding and abortion – I have grouped these together as from a TCM perspective they are basically treated in the same way. We may often treat abortion with hormone supplementation or, if we are suspicious of infectious causes, with antibiotics. Alternatively, I have had great success treating both of these conditions with one of two specific Chinese herbal formulas. These formulas also seem to help with the milk production after birth.

It is also important to remember the basics. Ensure your bitch has adequate vaccination to ensure her antibody levels are high enough to pass on good immunity to her puppies. Also ensure that she is wormed regularly. It is most important to worm your bitch prior to mating and again two weeks prior to whelping. We obviously recommend our Aushound® All Wormers but if you chose to use a different preparation carefully check that it is safe to use during pregnancy and nursing.

In terms of diet, for the first five weeks there is no need to feed an increased ration although many people like to increase calcium supplementation. For the final four weeks of pregnancy it is important to feed an increased amount as the calorie requirements go up significantly. Most bitches will require at least a double ration to maintain good body condition and be able to sustain the normal growth of her puppies. The preparation of your dog or bitch for breeding should begin well before the breeding is expected to occur. Some reproductive problems can take several months to rectify and as a breeder there is very little that is more disappointing than an unsuccessful mating. With a little advanced planning the likelihood of this happening can be greatly reduced