

THE RESPONSIBLE BREEDER CHECKLIST

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You're just getting started as a new breeder, or maybe you've had a couple litters, and you try your best to make responsible breeding decisions. But there are so many steps from beginning to end, and so many sources giving you conflicting information, that it's hard to know if you've missed a critical task. That's why I put together this Responsible Breeder Checklist for you – so you can have all the steps to be a Responsible Breeder in one place.

How to Use This Resource: This checklist is divided into sections based on the chronological order you'll need to complete these tasks. Read through all the sections to get an overview, and then review the individual sections when they're relevant. This checklist is written as a guide to breeding your female dog, and therefore uses the pronouns "she/her," but if you're looking to breed your male dog instead, everything still applies – just swap the pronouns!

Disclaimer: This resource is designed to act as a guide and is not meant to replace medical advice. For questions regarding your dog's health, please contact your veterinarian.

The Planning Stage (Long Before It's Time to Breed)

Find a mentor

Your mentor should be someone who follows responsible breeding guidelines and is eager to teach/train. Ideally your mentor is someone who also has your breed, but this is not essential if they are experienced enough to know your breed as well.

Be able to clearly state your purpose for breeding

Why do these puppies need to exist? Are you trying to get a champion in the show ring? Do you need a dog for herding? Protection? Obedience? Really great pets? Having a specific purpose for breeding will inform everything from breeding decisions to the families you choose for your puppies' new homes.

Be prepared for things to go wrong

Anything can (and will) go wrong in the world of dog breeding. Have you prepared yourself? Have you learned what is normal so

you know if something is abnormal? Have you saved up money for an emergency c-section (just in case)? Are you willing to tube feed puppies every 2 hours around the clock if something happens to mom or if a puppy has a cleft palate? Are you willing to take back a dog if the new family isn't able to keep it, even years later? If you aren't prepared to deal with these situations, reconsider your decision to breed.

Find a veterinarian comfortable with reproductive medicine

Just like in human medicine, veterinarians have different focus areas. Most veterinarians don't see puppies until they are 6-8 weeks of age and therefore aren't familiar with normal breeding, pregnancy, and newborns. Your reproductive veterinarian does not need to be your general practice veterinarian. You might need to drive several hours (depending on your location) to reach one. Contact the veterinarian to let them know that you are a new responsible breeder and schedule an appointment to establish a "Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship (VCPR)," even if you plan to do breeding management yourself. This will legally give the veterinarian the ability to provide specific guidance during whelping or when the puppies arrive.

Before It's Time to Breed

Complete her health tests

Exactly which tests are necessary depends on the breed. To get more information on which tests are important in your breed, check the list at [OFA](#) or [Good Dog](#). Some common health test examples include running a DNA disease panel, taking x-rays to look for hip dysplasia, or taking her to a veterinary specialist for eye tests, heart tests, or hearing tests.

Wait until she's old enough to breed

Usually approximately 2 years old. This is especially critical for medium and large breed dogs so they can reach physical, sexual, emotional, and hormonal maturity.

Evaluate her temperament

Behavior is a result of many different factors, but one of those factors is genetics. She should be calm and friendly, including around strangers. This doesn't necessarily mean she should be overtly outgoing if this isn't appropriate for the breed and purpose, but she should generally tolerate being handled and should not exhibit signs of inappropriate aggression.

Identify her faults

No one's perfect. By identifying her faults or shortcomings, you can conscientiously choose a match for her that will decrease the likelihood that she will pass these faults on to her puppies.

Consider her family history

What do you know about her extended family? Were they healthy long into old age? Are there family members who developed disease? This is especially important for diseases that don't have good genetic markers or diseases which develop late in age, as these diseases are often not identified on routine health tests. The health of her extended family therefore becomes a very useful tool in evaluating the picture of her lifetime health and, therefore, the health of her potential puppies.

Consider her overall health

Is she healthy? Well protected from disease via appropriate vaccinations? Free from fleas and ticks? Free from disease, including severe allergies? Is she a healthy weight? The healthier she is, the safer it is for her body to go through a pregnancy, and the healthier the puppies will be. Our goal is to produce healthy, well-adjusted, purpose-bred puppies!

Test her for brucellosis

Brucella canis is a devastating disease which can be transmitted to humans and is NOT CURABLE. The current recommendation for dogs with brucellosis is either euthanasia or lifetime quarantine. *Brucella* can be transmitted via bodily fluids including reproductive fluids and respiratory fluids. Test her before breeding and require that the stud has been tested within the last 6 months.

Find a stud

Taking all of the above information into consideration, identify a stud who also meets all the above criteria and also is a good match for her genetically, behaviorally, and physically. Do this well ahead of her breeding cycle so you aren't scrambling at the last minute!

Breeding Management and Pregnancy

Consider progesterone testing

Progesterone is a hormone which rises in her body when she ovulates. Veterinarians can use progesterone measurements to pinpoint when she ovulated, which can then be used to identify her due date. This is much more accurate than relying on breeding dates alone - gestation length is 62-64 days from ovulation, whereas it can be anywhere between 59-68 days from breeding.

Consider ultrasound to confirm pregnancy

This is optional, but a pregnancy can be confirmed via ultrasound as early as 21 days after ovulation (typically we recommend 4 weeks).

DON'T increase food until the third trimester (42 days)

Mom's nutritional needs don't actually increase until the third trimester, and feeding her more than she needs can cause her to gain too much weight. After 42 days, her caloric needs increase by approximately 10% per week. Feed a high-quality performance or puppy food, as these foods have a high caloric density and nutrients to support the additional demand on her body. Examples include Purina Pro Plan Sport, Purina Pro Plan Puppy, Royal Canin Mother and Babydog, Royal Canin Puppy, or Hills Science Diet Puppy. DON'T supplement calcium before whelping as this can decrease the function of her parathyroid gland, which is critical during lactation.

Schedule a puppy-count x-ray one week before her due date

It's critical to know how many puppies you're expecting. If you don't have a count, you won't know when she's done! Although this does expose the puppies and mom to a small dose of x-rays, this is safe to do and provides valuable information that far outweighs the risk.

Whelping

Familiarize yourself with the timeline of “normal” whelping

The list of all the things that can go wrong during whelping is infinite. Check out [this flowchart](#) for a starting point.

Puppy Care

Deworm the puppies at 2, 4, 6, and 8 weeks

All puppies are exposed to worms. There are microscopic worm eggs in your yard, on your floor, and on mom’s coat. It’s unavoidable, no matter how clean you keep your environment. Therefore, all puppies should be dewormed at 2, 4, 6, and 8 weeks. Mom should also be dewormed at 2 weeks and then as needed based on fecal results.

Provide intentional, structured socialization opportunities

Puppies (and all creatures) have a period early on in life when their brain takes in experiences and categorizes them as “normal.” This impacts the way they interact with the world for the rest of their life. In dogs, this period is from 3-12 weeks of age. Responsible breeders carefully design a “protocol” for exposing their puppies to as many safe experiences as possible. There are multiple systems and techniques to help you organize these efforts, including Fear Free Pets, Dr. Sophia Yin’s Perfect Puppy book, and Puppy Culture. They all include exposure to similar experiences - children, men, surfaces, machines, sounds, animals, etc.

Provide safe, age-appropriate vaccines

Some breeders choose to have vaccines administered at the vet and some choose to vaccinate the puppies themselves. Either approach can be effective if the vaccines are handled appropriately. If you decide to vaccinate the puppies yourself, make sure you order the vaccines from a reputable source such as Revival Animal Health and

have the vaccines shipped directly to your house instead of purchasing them somewhere like a feed store. That way, you can confirm that the vaccines arrive appropriately cold with frozen icepacks. If vaccines are allowed to reach room temperature or, worse, left out to be warmed in the sun on a loading dock, they are NOT effective, and your puppies will NOT be protected.

Keep puppies with their mother until at least 8 weeks

This will give the puppies enough time to develop physically, socially, and emotionally. In some breeds, the puppies should stay with their mother until 10-12 weeks. Talk with your mentor to get additional guidance on whether your breed is one of these.

Carefully screen potential new homes

You've worked really hard to give these puppies a great start to life. Make sure their future home has the same vision for the puppy's life and purpose that you do.

Final Thoughts

From beginning to end, the decisions you make in your breeding program should ALWAYS prioritize the health of your dogs over everything else, including financial gain. You should be willing to make ZERO dollars or even lose money on a litter if that's what it takes to keep your dogs healthy. This is not to say that you can't make money on a litter, but responsible breeders NEVER let this take priority over their dogs' health.

I also cannot overstate the importance of building relationships with good mentors and a good reproductive veterinarian BEFORE you need them. There will be a point that you're in a crisis and you need answers, and that's not the situation in which you want to reach out for the first time!

Our world needs more responsibly-bred dogs, and I thank you for your dedication, hard work, and commitment to learning as you help to make that happen!