

When a Newborn Puppy Needs Help

Early warning signs & when to call the veterinarian

EMERGENCY: GO NOW / CALL WHILE LEAVING

Not breathing normally, gasping, blue/gray or very pale gums, limp or unresponsive, seizures, collapse, or profound weakness. Seek emergency veterinary care immediately. Do not wait for a scheduled weight check.

WATCH THE PUPPY, NOT JUST THE LITTER

Nursing: Unable to latch, repeatedly displaced, weak or absent suckling, or a sudden change in feeding.

Behavior: Unusual persistent crying, restlessness, isolation, or becoming unusually quiet and unresponsive.

Weight: Continued loss, failure to establish an upward trend, or a meaningful deviation from that puppy's prior weights.

Body / elimination: Abnormally cold to touch, swollen or painful abdomen, diarrhea, vomiting/regurgitation, or blood in urine.

IF YOU NOTICE A CHANGE

1. Recheck promptly: Confirm the puppy's ID, time, weight, nursing behavior, and observed symptoms.
2. Call the veterinarian: Any weak, cold, non-nursing, or deteriorating puppy needs prompt professional guidance; severe signs require emergency care.
3. Protect during transport: Keep the puppy dry and gently warm, using a wrapped, indirect heat source with space away from heat. Avoid burns and overheating.

IMPORTANT: A quiet puppy is not automatically a healthy puppy. A suddenly silent, weak puppy can be critically ill.

What to Do While Getting Help

Recognize the pattern; do not assume “fading puppy” is a diagnosis

FOUR POSSIBLE PROBLEMS — OFTEN OVERLAPPING

Too cold (hypothermia): Poor nursing, lethargy, cool body. Warm gradually under veterinary direction; avoid direct heating pads against the puppy.

Low energy / blood sugar (hypoglycemia): Weakness, tremors, poor suckling, seizures. Requires prompt veterinary advice or emergency treatment.

Dehydration / inadequate intake: Poor feeding, concerning weights, weakness. A veterinarian must assess hydration and the safest way to provide support.

Infection or another illness: Temperature changes, abnormal crying, bloating, diarrhea, breathing trouble, rapid decline. Can become life-threatening quickly.

DO NOT

Force-feed or syringe-feed: Never put liquid into the mouth of a weak puppy that cannot swallow reliably; aspiration can be fatal.

Tube-feed without training: Incorrect placement can be dangerous. Do not improvise doses of glucose, fluids, antibiotics, or other medication.

Rapidly heat or leave unattended on heat: Direct heat may burn; rapid warming can create problems. Follow your veterinarian's plan.

Wait for the puppy to “bounce back”: Clinical deterioration in neonates can be rapid. Early veterinary evaluation matters.

VETERINARY CONTACTS & HANDOFF

Primary veterinarian: _____ Phone: _____

24-hour emergency hospital: _____ Phone: _____

Puppy ID / birth time: _____ Last confirmed nursing: _____

Weights & times: _____ Symptoms / time first seen: _____

Clinical review: Pending individual veterinary review and approval. Veterinarian: _____ Date: _____

Basis: Merck Veterinary Manual, “Management of the Neonate in Dogs and Cats” (updated Aug 2025); Dr. Emmanuel Fontaine, “Navigating Through the Enigma of Fading Puppy Syndrome.” This educational recognition sheet does not replace veterinary diagnosis or treatment.

merckvetmanual.com/management-and-nutrition/management-of-the-neonate/management-of-the-neonate-in-dogs-and-cats
dremmanuelfontaine.com/2023/07/07/navigating-through-the-enigma-of-fading-puppy-syndrome/