

False Pregnancy (Pseudocyesis) in Dogs

Dr. Mike Paul, DVM

Mike has more than 35 years of experience in companion animal veterinary practice and is a valued member of IDEXX's Pet Health Network team since 2013.

If your female dog hasn't been spayed yet, you may find yourself scratching your head and wondering why she's looking and acting as if she's pregnant when you are absolutely certain that there isn't any chance of it. Why is she acting pregnant? How could she be pregnant when she's never out of your sight? Relax, she may just be experiencing false pregnancy—a very common condition for intact or unsplayed, female dogs that occurs after they go through an estrus or heat cycle. Even so, a call to your veterinarian for any abnormal behavior in your dog is always a good idea.

[Editors Note: [There are many medical benefits to spaying or neutering your dog: here are 10 great reasons to do it sooner rather than later.](#)]

What is "False Pregnancy" in dogs?

Hormonally, every time a female dog, or bitch, ovulates her progesterone levels rise and stay elevated to nearly the same degree—and for just as long—whether or not she conceives and becomes pregnant. (This is why testing progesterone levels in dogs is a great method for verifying ovulation, but has no value whatsoever when determining pregnancy.) Once the progesterone levels begin to fall, another hormone, prolactin, naturally rises. These perfectly normal hormonal fluctuations can physiologically make your dog's body (and sometimes her mind) think that she is pregnant.

As a result, after any heat cycle, your dog can experience most of the same signs of pregnancy as when she's not actually pregnant:

- Early lethargy
- Inappetance
- Nausea
- Weight gain
- Mammary enlargement
- Milk production

In addition to these physical changes, some dogs go on to exhibit psychological changes. Your dog may prepare a nest in anticipation of impending, imaginary, new arrivals and may even adopt a surrogate "puppy" (a toy or some other object) to nurture when no real puppy miraculously materializes.

How do you know if this pregnancy is real or false?

If you're absolutely certain that your dog cannot be pregnant, then you probably do not need to worry, but you should call your veterinarian just to be sure. If you are not so absolutely certain, however, and you want to be a conscientious, responsible pet parent, you should seek confirmation and advice from your veterinarian. Easy, at-home, urine pregnancy tests are not available for our canine friends so a combination of physical examination findings, abdominal palpation, blood tests, radiographs and/or ultrasound will be the only way to know for sure.

What do you do if your dog is experiencing a false pregnancy?

First of all, remember that false pregnancy is not a disease and is normal. Unfortunately, your dog may still be uncomfortable and possibly distressed by the process. If you feel you need to assist with the resolution of symptoms, try to discourage maternal behaviors by taking away surrogate puppies and nesting sites; disrupt the stimulation of mammary glands or milk production by using Elizabethan collars or t-shirts—they'll keep your dog from licking the engorged glands. Medical intervention is possible, but it is reserved for severe cases since the drugs that can be used are not without side effects.

How can I prevent false pregnancy?

Female dogs that are shown to be predisposed to experiencing false pregnancies will most likely do so repeatedly after subsequent heat cycles. That means that the only prevention is spaying. So if you are not intent on breeding your dog, have her spayed before her next heat cycle to save you all the stress and discomfort of another false pregnancy.

If you have any questions or concerns, you should always visit or call your veterinarian -- they are your best resource to ensure the health and well-being of your pets.