Points on Pets: Avoiding the 'pregnant paws'

by R.G._Elmor_DVM

Q: We are really puzzled by our dog's strange behavior. Although we are absolutely positive that she has never been bred, she is acting like she is pregnant! Our dog's mammary glands are enlarging and she has a little discharge from her nipples. She looks like she is getting ready to nurse puppies. When our dog was in season several weeks ago we did not let her go outside without us. There is just no way that our dog got bred! What is going on? Does our dog have a hormonal problem, which is causing her to produce milk and look pregnant? We have never seen anything like this.

A: Although it is impossible to say with certainty what is causing your dog's strange behavior without actually seeing her and knowing much more about her, it is likely that she is experiencing a condition commonly called false or pseudopregnancy.

False pregnancy is most often diagnosed in intact dogs two to three months following their last heat periods. Having swollen mammary glands is not uncommon in dogs with pseudopregnancy. Owners also often report behavioral changes similar to those seen in pregnant bitches approaching whelping. These dogs act like they are pregnant even though they are not, thus, the name false pregnancy.

Pseudopregnancy has been reported in virtually all breeds and in dogs of all ages. However, some families of dogs tend to have an increased incidence of this disease. Recurrences of pseudopregnancy are not uncommon in some bitches after every heat period. It is interesting that having a pseudopregnancy does not seem to decrease the chances that a bitch will become pregnant if bred to a fertile male at the correct time during subsequent heats.

You should take your dog to your veterinarian as soon as possible for a complete physical examination. Your veterinarian will determine the cause for the strange behavior you are witnessing and the abnormal signs seen in your dog and then prescribe an appropriate treatment. Although most dogs recover from false pregnancies without any complications, some do become very ill if not treated promptly after noticing the first abnormal signs.

Unless you really want puppies from your dog, you should have her spayed as soon as your veterinarian is willing to do the surgery. The surgery will prevent the occurrence of heats and false pregnancies. You should ask your veterinarian to outline a complete wellness program for your dog.

Q: We are dismayed that our longtime veterinarian refuses to do a vasectomy on our new puppy. We have always had female dogs in the past. Although we do not want our first male to sire offspring, we also do not want him to be disfigured and to lose his maleness by being castrated. The idea of castration is offensive to us. Why is our veterinarian so opposed to the procedure?

A: It might be that your current veterinarian is unfamiliar with the vasectomy procedure. If so, he or she should be willing to refer you to another veterinarian to have a vasectomy performed on your dog. Your request is not unreasonable. Many veterinarians perform vasectomies regularly as a part of their practices. Most vasectomized dogs recover from the surgery very quickly without any complications. Following surgery it is very important to keep your dog away from female dogs for a period of six to seven weeks. It is also a good idea to have your dog examined after several weeks to be sure that he is not able to discharge any sperm.

Send an e-mail or write to Pets, P.O. Box 120190, San Diego, CA 92112-0190. Only questions of general interest will be answered in this column.

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