

# Bottle Babies: When to Be Concerned

Neonatal puppies are incredibly fragile, so recognizing concerning signs is crucial to saving a weak newborn puppy in time!

A **healthy newborn puppy** will cry and squirm when handled and settle down when put back with its mother or in the warmth of its nest.<sup>1</sup> They will twitch in their sleep, which is their primary activity (about 90% of the time), followed by eating and going potty.

Primary causes of neonatal death include: hypothermia (too cold), hypoglycemia (low blood sugar), dehydration, and sepsis.<sup>2</sup> Sepsis is often the culmination of weight loss, increased vocalization, hypothermia, weakness, regurgitation, and persistent diarrhea.<sup>3</sup>

There is not a lot that can be done for neonates, due to their age and size, but care includes bottle or tube-feeding, providing additional warmth, administering fluids, and giving antibiotics.

*This guide is based on our in-depth [Newborn Puppies: When to Be Concerned](#). Recommend reading for more information and additional references.*

<sup>1</sup> Davidson, A. P. (2022, December 5). Management of the Neonate in Dogs and Cats. Merck Veterinary Manual.

<https://www.merckvetmanual.com/management-and-nutrition/management-of-the-neonate/management-of-the-neonate-in-dogs-and-cats>

<sup>2</sup> 4 Main Causes of Newborn Puppy Illness and Death. (2023, February 16). Revival Animal Health.

<https://www.revivalanimal.com/learning-center/4-main-causes-of-newborn-puppy-illness-and-death>

<sup>3</sup> Simermeyer, L. (2020, July 3). Neonatal nursing care for high-risk puppies and kittens.

<https://www.dvm360.com/view/neonatal-nursing-care-for-high-risk-puppies-and-kittens>



# Signs of Failing Newborn Puppies

## Sign #1: Failure to Gain Weight

Newborn puppies should gain approximately 10% of their body weight each day. They do not need to gain weight after each feeding, but the 24-hour trend should be upward.

- Feed based on Bottle Baby Feeding Schedule
- Feed less per feeding but increase feedings
- Use syringe to feed if latching is an issue
- Tube-feed (only by experienced individuals)

## Sign #2: Crying Frequently

At this stage, puppies often cry because they're hungry, cold, lost, or need to potty. If those are all addressed, you'll need to look at whether they're gaining weight, if they're dehydrated, chilled, or going into sepsis.

## Sign #3: Dehydrated

When the skin of a hydrated puppy is pinched, it should return quickly when released (less than two seconds), but if you see it slowly flattening back against the body, your pup is dehydrated. A puppy's urine should be nearly clear to pale yellow. If it is a darker yellow, then it is likely some dehydration is present.

- Increase humidity of their crate
- Add 10-25% more water to formula
- Give Puppy Lyte for added electrolytes for 1-2 feedings
- Give warmed, subcutaneous fluids at 1ml/30 grams (if experienced)



#### **Sign #4: Lethargic or Weak Suckle**

If the puppy's body seems limp or relaxed, or if they are not squirming when being held or upon waking, you may have a lethargic puppy. Lethargy can be brought on by hypoglycemia, dehydration, and being chilled. Lethargy can also present in the pup having a weak or lack of suckle.

- Check for cleft palate (opening in the hard or soft palate)
- Take rectal temperature to ensure pup is at least 96 degrees before feeding (see Newborn Puppy Milestones)
  - Warm up gradually before feeding if it is below 96 degrees.
- Rub nutritional calorie gel on newborn's gums/tongue, wait 5 to 15 minutes before feeding, then bottle or tube-feed as appropriate

#### **Sign #5: Chilled or Cold**

Newborn puppies cannot regulate their body temperature, so their environment needs to be warm. Do not feed a chilled neonate; it must be gradually warmed up before feeding to avoid regurgitation and aspiration. Those can lead to aspiration pneumonia and difficulty breathing.

- Take rectal temperature to ensure pup is at least 96 degrees before feeding (see Newborn Puppy Milestones)
- Rub nutritional calorie gel on newborn's gums/tongue, wait 5 to 15 minutes before feeding, then bottle or tube-feed as appropriate
- Check heat source and ensure adequate heat is provided
- Move crate away from drafts; place a blanket or towel over

High-risk newborns are best placed in an incubator to ensure proper humidity (40% to 55%) and temperature.

# Stay Calm, Do Your Best

The signs above should be taken seriously, monitored aggressively, and it's better for you to intervene sooner rather than later because there is no time to waste when it comes to saving a newborn puppy from dying.

The longer a newborn puppy has been experiencing the above signs, the harder it may be to bring them back from the brink of death, especially if they've been chilled too long or are in septic shock.

There are not a lot of treatments available for dying newborn puppies; most include supportive care, such as intravenous fluids, incubation, and oxygen. Broad-spectrum antibiotics that are safe for neonates can be given if appropriate. Anyone expecting to care for newborn puppies should be prepared to provide basic supportive care such as bottle or tube-feeding and administering fluids or calorie gel.

Sometimes, despite early intervention and our best efforts, a newborn neonate will not make it. This is the hard part about taking care of newborn puppies, but without our intervention, they would not have even had a chance to survive.

