

## **Feeding Puppies**

### **Part 1: Weaning From Mom**

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Mountain Dog Food

As a natural progression, discussions of what to feed mom during pregnancy soon turns to questions of how to help mom and the pups when it comes time for weaning. In most cases mom has a good handle on things and her milk will more than adequately meet the needs of the growing puppies. Interestingly both dogs and cats produce milk that has nearly double the amount of protein and fat when compared to that of cow or goat's milk. This difference reflects their carnivorous nature and the need for a diet that is higher in these nutrients when compared to other animals. For this reason it is common practice to use raw egg yolks as one of the additions to goats milk if the mother's milk supply needs to be supplemented. The egg yolk supplies the puppy (or kitten) with an additional source of balanced protein and also increases the fat content.

Despite the fact that years of evolution tell us mother's milk is best it is only instinctive for questions to emerge. Is there a point where we should give assistance? How do we begin to introduce whole foods? Are there some foods that are tolerated better than others? How long should we allow mom to nurse? Of course these are all questions that are dependent on a number of different variables – such as the size of the litter, the health and condition of mom and of course our comfort level with the diet choice. However, this discussion will hopefully provide a general basis for knowledge and a place to further the discussions with your vet and other breeders.

Around 4 weeks of age the puppies start to become more mobile and will have their eyes open. Physiologically it is at this time that their digestive systems are able to deal with the introduction of new foods. Prior to this they only have the capacity to breakdown their mothers milk. The question now exists of what type of foods should be given. From a nutritional standpoint the less processed a diet is and the closer it fits with an animals biological needs the better. These are two of the main reasons why the raw diet has gotten a lot of attention lately and why it is one of the most natural ways to feed your animal. Regardless of the quality, commercial food it is still a product that is made with a high concentration of grains, chemical preservatives and is cooked at high temperatures – a combination that does not lead to optimum health over the long term.

While some breeders still choose to feed a commercial diet there has been a definite move towards feeding raw or home-prepared foods. If going this route most breeders will introduce food in the form of chicken backs or necks (depending on the size of the puppies) for the first 4 to 5 days. At this stage their teeth are too immature to get much meat off the bone but this allows them time to adjust to the change in texture, taste and smell. After a few minutes you can let mom back into the whelping box and let her clean up the meal. For their first real meal you are essentially feeding the same backs or necks but now in a finely ground form, mixed with some warm water to make the mixture more of a soft gruel. At this point they are still nursing from mom as their primary source of nutrition so these meals do not need to meet their daily energy needs. They merely serve as an introduction to their future diet and eventually will help to lessen the demand for milk on mom.

After a week or so you can gradually start to introduce new ingredients to their meals, adding in some ground fruits and vegetables for variety. As the weeks progress you can also add in alternate meat sources and organ meats as tolerated and slowly increase the size of the meals fed. During this time you can still offer the pups the chicken necks or backs, slightly crushed at first working towards feeding in whole form. Their addition to the diet will allow the pups some exercise and will help them through teething. By about 7 weeks the puppies will essentially be eating whatever mom is having for dinner. This will include a variety of meat sources (chicken, turkey, beef, lamb – depending on availability), organ meats, raw bones and some fruits and vegetables.

Within reason they can continue to nurse as long as mom tolerates. At this time, however, their meals of whole food should be the majority of their intake. As a general rule the amount fed should be between 4-5% of their current body weight, weighing the puppies each week to adjust the amount being fed. Of course every dog is different depending on his or her energy level and rate of growth and therefore amounts fed should be adjusted for each animal. A good visual clue is the amount of fat covering the rib cage. The ribs should not be prominent but should still be easily felt when you run your hands over them. Too much fat covering can be just as detrimental to their health as a dog that is undernourished.

Once the pups are no longer nursing it is a good idea to begin adding some basic supplements to their diet. These include simple things like sea kelp, salmon oil (or other fish body oils) and raw eggs that you can just mix in with the food. There are of course plenty of other options such as vitamin C or E supplements, apple cider vinegar, probiotics or various herbal treatments. However their use is dependent upon the specific needs of your dog and does not apply across the board to every animal. Essentially, whole foods are the best source of nutrients and supplementing should only be done to replace missing elements in the diet. The addition of these extras should be discussed with your vet and/or breeder in order to find the right fit for your animals.

Keep in mind that their it is their entire environment, including diet, proper exercise and socialization, that has an impact on their overall health. Any positive changes you can make towards their care will make a difference in the big picture. Most importantly relish their personality quirks as they stumble through obstacles in their world for the first time – they always grow up too fast.

Coming Next: Making the Transition into Adulthood.