

Bizarre Behaviors Triggered by Altered Hormones

You'd likely consider this anything but normal. Yet it's a normal physiologic process — not a disorder at all. It could actually be an ingenious design of nature. Here's how to diagnose it, and how to be sure it's not accompanied by a life-threatening bacterial infection.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- False pregnancy can occur in intact female dogs of any age, and may be more prevalent in certain breeds
- The hormone prolactin is responsible for most of the signs of false pregnancy, which can include behavior changes, mothering behavior, mammary changes and nausea/vomiting
- An uncomplicated false pregnancy typically resolves on its own without medical intervention; however, a dog with symptoms that go beyond eight weeks should be evaluated by a veterinarian
- Homecare involves preventing self-nursing and mothering of inanimate objects, and reducing lactation if necessary with appropriate herbs
- Dogs who have experienced false pregnancy shouldn't be sterilized until all signs and symptoms have resolved

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False pregnancy, also known as pseudopregnancy, phantom pregnancy or pseudocyesis, is a condition that can occur in intact female dogs. It can occur at any age and in any breed, and it may be more prevalent in Dalmatians, Basset Hounds and Pointers.

False Pregnancy in Dogs Isn't Technically a Disorder

False pregnancy is actually a normal physiologic process associated with normal reproductive organs. There's no disorder happening. The condition typically develops between 45 and 60 days after a normal heat cycle when progesterone levels, which naturally rise after ovulation, begin to decline.

The decreasing progesterone levels trigger an increase in the production of the hormone prolactin. Interestingly, some female dogs show signs of false pregnancy within three to four days after being spayed, probably because spaying removes the source of the progesterone, the ovaries, which triggers prolactin production as well.

Signs and Symptoms of False Pregnancy

Prolactin is responsible for most of the behaviors that occur during a dog's false pregnancy, and can range from barely noticeable to impossible to ignore. Sometimes the dog seems so convincingly pregnant that even experienced breeders can begin preparing for a litter of puppies. Signs include:

- Behavioral changes such as fluctuations in appetite, excessive vocalization, **whining**, restlessness, aggression, depression, or **anxiety**.
- Mothering behaviors such as nesting, digging, or "adopting" toys, stuffed animals or other objects around the house
- Mammary changes such as engorgement, lactation (producing milk) and self-nursing
- Abdominal distention
- Nausea and vomiting

The fact that some intact, non-pregnant female dogs produce milk could actually be an ingenious design of nature, because in the wild, adult females without pups are regularly called upon to nurse orphaned litters.

Diagnosing False Pregnancy

Diagnosing a false pregnancy is actually very straightforward. Your veterinarian will conduct a physical exam, take a history of your dog's symptoms and behavior, as well as determine if she went through heat in the last six to 12 weeks. Since female dogs carry litters of puppies for about two months, if it's been longer than that since your dog's heat cycle, it's very unlikely she's pregnant.

X-rays or an abdominal ultrasound can be used to definitively determine if your dog is pregnant and can eliminate the need for other diagnostic tests, unless your vet thinks they're necessary. These imaging tests can also check for pyometra, which is a bacterial infection of the uterus that can be life-threatening.

Rarely, a female dog showing signs of false pregnancy actually was pregnant and either spontaneously aborted or reabsorbed her pups. If this is the case, her risk for developing pyometra is very high.

Treatment and Homecare for a Dog with False Pregnancy

An uncomplicated false pregnancy typically resolves on its own and no medical intervention is needed. However, since certain diseases such as hypothyroidism and liver dysfunction can prolong symptoms of pseudopregnancy due to altered hormone metabolism, some dogs exhibit unusually long false pregnancies. If your dog's symptoms pass the eight-week mark, she should definitely be screened for another underlying disease.

When it comes to home care of a pet experiencing pseudopregnancy, some dog parents and breeders apply hot or cold compresses to swollen mammary glands. This approach isn't recommended because it can stimulate milk production. Some people also put an E-collar or t-shirt on their dog to prevent her from self-nursing, which is a good idea. It's also important to hide any items she's fixated on or trying to mother.

If your dog's symptoms are really significant, your vet may suggest skipping nighttime meals for several days in a row to help reduce milk production. Some veterinarians also prescribe diuretics and mild sedatives.

Hormone therapy is also sometimes used by conventional veterinarians to manage a false pregnancy with severe symptoms. However, synthetic hormones for any mammal isn't recommended unless the situation is profoundly affecting quality of life. There are natural supplements that can help reduce prolactin levels, which are actually the same herbs used to help lactating human moms cease milk production. If necessary, you can offer these to your dog. They include:

- Sage
- Oregano
- Chickweed
- Parsley
- Lemon balm
- Peppermint

Some of these over-the-counter herbs can be bought at health food stores, and are very successfully for lactating dogs. Work with your integrative veterinarian to scale down the dose for your dog. If you're planning to sterilize your dog, you'll need to wait until all signs of false pregnancy have been resolved. Consider spaying in-estrus, which is halfway through her heat cycle, to make sure that there's no hormone activity.
