

Small Animal Neonatal Health

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KEYWORDS

• Neonate • Appgar • Viability • Puppy • Kitten

KEY POINTS

- Adequate warmth for neonates is essential and is often overlooked.
- Glucose levels and hydration status must be maintained by frequent feedings or medical intervention.
- Fetal viability score sheets and neonatal weight charts are easy to use and provide critical information for both the owner and the medical team.
- The single best indicator of neonatal well-being for owners is steady weight gain.

INTRODUCTION

Educating the Veterinary Team

Depending on the veterinary college you attended, small animal neonatology may or may not have even been part of the curriculum. The teaching of small animal theriogenology topics in the veterinary curriculum has evolved significantly over the last 20 years. In fact, one could argue that what is taught on this particular subject has changed more during that time than any other discipline within our profession.

Those who graduated before 1990 were likely taught a great deal about theriogenology and the basic care of neonates because they were accustomed to seeing patients who were sexually intact, having either planned or unplanned litters that required care. In contrast, those who graduated between 1990 and 2005 were likely taught very little small animal theriogenology except to neuter every dog and cat, in a concerted effort to control the pet overpopulation problem at that time. Overall, this group of veterinarians is the least likely to have basic knowledge of neonatal care simply because most of their patients were not intact.

For those who have graduated since 2005, there has been a major shift in the mindset of both pet owners and also our profession. Therefore, we are all beginning to question and investigate when, and even *whether*, some pets should be

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gonadectomized. The veterinarians who are graduating now will be the ones to encounter this paradigm shift in pet ownership as it relates to the decision of neutering and, thus, will likely see more intact dogs and cats and, consequently, more neonates, throughout their career.

This same trajectory of reproductive and neonatal knowledge can be extrapolated to the veterinary support staff as well. It should never be assumed that support staff, even those who are credentialed, are trained in neonatal care. Both veterinarians and support staff in the veterinary hospital can benefit from a periodic review of basic principles of neonatal clinical care. *With both veterinary students and support staff, the author repeatedly emphasizes the most common threats to newborns: hypothermia, hypoglycemia, and dehydration.* Adding an annual training session in basic neonatology for staff can pay big dividends in client retention/satisfaction as well as improve outcomes for your patients. This is one area of veterinary medicine where having a strong knowledge base of simple physiology and common clinical presentations for neonates (hypothermia, hypoglycemia, dehydration) can often mitigate adverse outcomes.

Educating Owners

In contrast to the veterinary team, owners are often armed with vast experience in caring for neonates. In these situations, both veterinarians and support staff can benefit from learning useful tips and tricks from experienced breeders. In the author's clinic, approximately half of the clients are experienced breeders. Consequently, that also means that the other half are novice breeders and require more help from the hospital team. The author has discovered that once the support staff is comfortable, they actually enjoy educating owners.

The author has also discovered that owners enjoy the interaction with the support staff (vs the doctors) because they are more comfortable asking questions and clarifying instructions. These educational sessions with clients are time consuming for the support staff but are of utmost importance with novice owners. The author commonly sees neonates lost to poor mothering/husbandry, and many of these situations can be avoided by educating owners to the early warning signs of neonates that are failing to thrive.

Steady weight gain is the author's number one parameter that is stressed to owners. To emphasize this point, the author's clinic records birth weights and sends home a weight chart for owners to complete for the first week of neonatal life (**Fig. 1**). The owners are instructed to purchase a small scale that measures in grams or ounces and to record the weight of the neonates twice daily on the chart. These scales are inexpensive and readily available on the kitchen aisle of local retail stores (**Fig. 2**). Steady weight gain is the number one indication of well-being in neonates. Failure to gain weight is often the first indication of a problem and can be noted by astute owners even before development of clinical signs, such as lethargy or inappetence. Encourage all hospital staff to reinforce with owners the 3 most important threats to neonates: hypothermia, hypoglycemia, and dehydration.

Key Points for Both Owners and the Veterinary Team

- Warmth first
- Nutrition second (*body temperature >95°F before feeding*)
- Stimulate urination/defection if dam does not
- Steady weight gain is single best indicator of neonatal well-being

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