

False Pregnancy

Basics

OVERVIEW

- Display of maternal behavior and physical signs of pregnancy 2–3 months after “heat” or “estrus” by a non-pregnant bitch caused by normal hormonal (progesterone, prolactin) changes in late diestrus
- Physical, hormonal, and behavioral changes following an unsuccessful mating or spontaneous ovulation in the queen; “ovulation” is the release of the egg from the ovary
- A female dog is a “bitch”; a female cat is a “queen”
- False pregnancy also known as “pseudopregnancy,” “phantom pregnancy,” or “pseudocyesis”

SIGNALMENT/DESCRIPTION OF PET

Species

- Dogs—common
- Cats

Breed Predilections

- None

Mean Age and Range

- Any age

Predominant Sex

- Female exclusively

SIGNS/OBSERVED CHANGES IN THE PET

- Severity variable among individuals and from one occurrence to the next within the same individual, 60% of cycling bitches show signs of false pregnancy
- In the queen, false pregnancy occurs in every non-pregnant ovulation; overt signs are uncommon
- Onset of signs is about 6–12 weeks after estrus in the bitch and 40 days after estrus in the queen
- Behavior changes—nesting, mothering activity (such as mothering a stuffed toy or unrelated puppies or kittens), aggression, sluggishness (lethargy)
- Abdominal distention (rare)
- Breast or mammary gland enlargement
- Weight gain
- Lack of appetite (known as “anorexia” or “inappetance”)
- Large mammary glands that secrete a clear to milky to brownish fluid (known as “galactorrhea”)

CAUSES

- False pregnancy is a normal phenomenon in bitches following ovulation (release of the egg from the ovary) that does not result in pregnancy
- In cats, spontaneous ovulation



- Progesterone and prolactin—drop in progesterone concentration causes prolactin concentration to rise; “progesterone” is the female hormone that supports and maintains pregnancy in a pregnant pet—it normally remains high in non-pregnant bitches for several weeks following heat or estrus; “prolactin” is a hormone that stimulates breast or mammary gland enlargement and milk production (known as “lactation”)
- Surgical removal of the ovaries (known as “oophorectomy” or “ovariectomy”) or the ovaries and uterus (known as “ovariohysterectomy” or “spay”) during the period when progesterone levels are high following heat or estrus—may develop signs of false pregnancy 3–14 days following surgery due to the sudden drop in progesterone
- Inadequate levels of thyroid hormone (known as “hypothyroidism”) with high thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH) concentration in the blood, which stimulates prolactin secretion—may note some hypothyroid-associated clinical signs

RISK FACTORS

- Ovariectomy or ovariohysterectomy or spay performed during the period when progesterone levels are high following heat or estrus

Treatment

HEALTH CARE

- Usually no treatment needed
- Outpatient for medical treatment of signs of false pregnancy
- Mammary glands—minimize stimuli that promote milk production (lactation); use cold packs applied to the breasts or mammary glands
- Elizabethan collar—prevent self-nursing or licking; but even rubbing of the collar on the mammary glands may be sufficient to prolong milk production (lactation)

DIET

- Reduction of caloric intake for several days may reduce milk production (lactation)

SURGERY

- Surgical removal of the ovaries and uterus (ovariohysterectomy or spay)—if the bitch or queen is not intended for breeding; recommended during the next anestrus (the time between heat or estrous cycles), when possible

Medications

Medications presented in this section are intended to provide general information about possible treatment. The treatment for a particular condition may evolve as medical advances are made; therefore, the medications should not be considered as all inclusive

- Cabergoline (Dostinex)—inhibits prolactin release; “prolactin” is a hormone that stimulates breast or mammary gland enlargement and milk production (lactation)
- Bromocriptine (Parlodel)—given with food; will reduce milk production (lactation) and reduce prolactin release
- Diazepam—to decrease anxiety; short-term treatment for bitches with extreme behavioral signs
- Mibolerone—to reduce signs of false pregnancy in bitches; will not be used in queens

Follow-Up Care

PATIENT MONITORING

- Surgical removal of the ovaries (ovariectomy) or ovaries and uterus (ovariohysterectomy or spay) during anestrus (the time between heat or estrous cycles)—prevents recurrence
- “Heat” or estrus suppression
- Observe milk glands for inflammation or change in color that might indicate infection (known as “mastitis”)

EXPECTED COURSE AND PROGNOSIS

- Usually resolves in 2–4 weeks without treatment

- Treatment with bromocriptine, cabergoline, or mibolerone—may resolve condition in 5–7 days
- False pregnancy may develop during subsequent heat or estrous cycles but does not impact fertility
- If milk glands become infected and inflamed as in mastitis, this may require separate treatment

Key Points

- False pregnancy is a normal phenomenon in bitches following ovulation (release of the egg from the ovary) when pregnancy has not resulted; some bitches experience repeated obvious false pregnancies while others exhibit silent false pregnancy, magnitude of signs can vary during a false pregnancy or between false pregnancies for the same bitch
- False pregnancies do not impact future fertility
- Bitches or queens should be evaluated for actual pregnancy before treating for false pregnancy
- No association has been identified between false pregnancy and reproductive abnormalities
- Pyometra (inflammation with accumulation of pus in the uterus) can develop in queens following spontaneous ovulation (release of the egg from the ovary)

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