



# Phantom Pregnancy in Dogs

## Overview

- A phantom pregnancy is a condition that can develop after a season, which causes a dog to act and feel pregnant when she isn't.
- During a phantom pregnancy, most dogs start nesting, behaving differently, and lactating (producing milk).
- Most phantom pregnancies are mild and resolve within a few weeks, but some are more extreme and require treatment from a vet.
- Most dogs that have experienced a phantom pregnancy will continue to have them throughout life unless they are [spayed](#).

## What is a phantom pregnancy



A phantom pregnancy (also called false pregnancy/pseudopregnancy) is a condition that can develop after a [season](#), that causes a dog to act and feel [pregnant](#) when she isn't. It's a very common problem female dogs because after each season, they produce 'pregnancy hormones' (regardless of whether they are pregnant or not!), which make some dogs feel pregnant when they aren't.

Fortunately, in most cases, the symptoms of a pseudopregnancy are mild and resolve in a few weeks, but for some, the symptoms are more extreme and



require medical treatment from a vet. It's important to keep a close eye on your dog if she is having a phantom pregnancy, because in some circumstances, it can cause more serious problems such as mastitis (mammary gland infection) and mammary cancers.

## Symptoms

Phantom pregnancies usually develop 6-8 weeks after a [season](#), and last for a few weeks. Symptoms tend to include:

- Swollen mammary glands and milk production (or clear-brown liquid)
- Nesting behaviour such as:
  - Collecting toys/blankets/clothes
  - Mothering a soft toy or another item
- [Nervousness and/or aggression](#)
- [Low energy](#)
- [Reduced appetite](#)
- Mastitis/mammary gland infection (in severe cases)
- Swollen tummy (in more extreme cases)

## Treatment

Before treating a phantom pregnancy, it's important to consider whether there is any chance your dog could actually be [pregnant](#) – if you have any doubt, your vet will be able to run some tests to confirm. Once pregnancy has been ruled out your vet will help you decide on the best treatment plan.

If your dog is only experiencing mild symptoms, treatment may not be necessary, but if she has developed behavioural or mammary problems your vet may advise the following:

### **Cabergoline**

Cabergoline is a hormone that stops pregnancy hormones being produced and reduces the symptoms of pseudopregnancy – especially milk production. It's usually given as a liquid by mouth for 1-2 weeks.

### **Distraction**

Lots of exercise and play will help distract your dog and reduce the symptoms of her phantom pregnancy.



### **Prevent overstimulation of the mammary glands**

It's important to prevent your dog licking around her nipples because this is likely to increase her milk production, and could even cause mastitis (infection of the mammary glands). The best way to stop your dog from licking herself, is by using a [protective body suit or buster collar](#).

### **Remove any toys she is 'mothering'**

If your dog 'mothering' her toys or other items, you may need to remove them. It's likely that your dog will be thinking of these toys as her puppies so you will need to take them away in a non-stressful way so she doesn't become upset or aggressive. A good way to go about it is to take her out for a walk while someone else removes the toys. If she starts nesting or mothering again, distract her with games, and toys that she is less likely to 'mother' such as a filled 'Kong'. Never punish your dog for mothering her toys, she won't understand because her behaviour is perfectly natural.

### **Preventing phantom pregnancies in dogs**

The best way to prevent a phantom pregnancy is to [spay your dog](#) (most dogs can be spayed at 6 months old).

### **When to contact your vet**

Contact your vet for advice if you think your dog might be having a phantom pregnancy. Contact them urgently if she appears to be in pain or developing a more serious problem such as mastitis (mammary gland infection).

**You know your dog best – always contact your vet if you're concerned.**

### **Cost**

Treating the symptoms of a false pregnancy can be expensive so it's important to speak openly to your vet about your finances, the cost of treatment, as well as what you think is right for your dog. It's often cheaper to spay your dog than it is to keep treating false pregnancies. Consider [insuring your dog](#) as soon as you get them, before any signs of illness start. This will ensure you have all the support you need to care for them.

[Am I eligible for PDSA veterinary treatment?](#)

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