

## The Debate About How Often to Breed a Bitch

By Karen Priest, Traumhof German Shepherd Dogs

My initial plan for my brood bitches was to breed each of them on one of their two heats annually, and “rest” them in between. My breeding females are also my beloved pets, and I wanted to make choices that were in their best interest.

The idea of breeding a bitch repeatedly conjured visions of puppy mills, with bitches in a sad state, weary and looking unthrifty. I was decidedly opposed to the practice. I thought I might occasionally do a back to back breeding, but it would be the exception rather than the norm.

Surprisingly, when I consulted with two Reproductive Specialist Veterinarians, they both advised against my “breed/ then skip” plan.

The debate about how often to breed is not a new one. Years ago a German breeder told me that it is always better to breed continuously, as many litters as you plan to have, and then spay the dog. I was told that bitches who are skipped in between frequently have a shorter breeding career due to problems getting pregnant and problems carrying litters to term. I wasn't sure I subscribed to that theory.

Another breeder I respected told me that she felt it was easier on the bitch to breed her only once a year and let her body rest and recover in between pregnancies. The rest period also left ample time if the bitch was still actively showing or competing. It takes time for a bitch to grow back her coat, get fit and back into work. This SOUNDED like a fair plan, and I suppose my decision to go that route was based on emotions more than science.

I didn't consider the debate again until I was faced with the issue of a bitch who “missed” (didn't get pregnant) after an intentional rest on a previous heat, and until I considered the age of a couple of my proven breeding bitches. I wondered if, given their age, it would be best to breed back to back and then retire them, rather than skip a heat and breed them when they were a calendar year older.

At this point, I consulted with Reproductive Specialist Veterinarians. (Anyone who owns a dog can tell you, it can be difficult to get two different vets to agree on anything from diet, to vaccine protocols, to treatments. Veterinarians' opinions fall on both sides of this debate. But, my feeling was, if I have a heart problem, I see a heart Doctor, not an OB-GYN. If I have a reproductive issue concerning my dogs, I prefer to take the advice of a specialist in that area.)

There seems to be general agreement amongst reproductive veterinarians. The consensus is that a bitch should be bred back to back for a planned number of breedings, and then spayed/retired.

I have taken the advice of my veterinarian, and I no longer skip every other heat, unless I have a reason to do. If we breed a young bitch during the winter, when training is all but halted, we might skip her next heat because she will be back in work, and we are aiming to title her.

I have not seen any detrimental effects on my girls after they have produced back to back litters. My feeling is, if they went into a litter fit and healthy and they “come back” readily, there is no reason not to breed again. If, for example, one of the girls has produced two large litters, and seems to take longer to regain her muscle/ fitness level, weight and coat, I might decide to rest her, knowing that I might not get her pregnant when next I hope to.

My dogs live in our home, they get ample exercise, high quality food, medical care, play time, and creature comforts. Having a litter doesn't seem to slow them down... in fact, some of the girls have to be forced to curtail their running around towards the end of their pregnancies.. they still want to romp and wrestle and Herd per usual. The girls are not depressed or run down or in poor shape. I see no ill effects after they have raised back to back litters.

The debate over how often to breed will surely continue. Individual breeders and puppy buyers will have to decide what they feel is right. Occasionally, I receive emails asking me how often I breed my girls. This question is almost always posed by someone doing careful research and trying to obtain a puppy from a reputable breeder. Usually, the person has been told or has read that a conscientious breeder will not breed back to back repeatedly. For those folks I offer this glimpse into my decision making process. I consider myself someone who has a high standard of care for my dogs. I do not feel I am compromising the girls or my standards, by breeding back to back. I also recommend making inquiries to a reproductive veterinarian for expert advice on the matter.

*In addition to the question of How Often to Breed, when to start and stop is also widely discussed. Some Breed Organizations allow for breeding a bitch at 22 months and over. The general consensus is to not breed prior to the bitch being 2 years old, and hopefully, by that time, she has had a couple heat cycles. (A bitch should not be bred on her 1<sup>st</sup> and some say, not even on her 2<sup>nd</sup> heat.)*

*Occasionally, a situation comes up where a bitch should be bred early, due to health considerations. For example, we have a bitch who developed pyometra at just over 1 year old. It was an open pyometra and the bitch was successfully treated. She was not spayed. Our vet advised us NOT to wait until she was 2 years old to breed her. Our vet felt the bitch should be bred on her next heat, to avoid the chance of pyometra reoccurring. She felt that breeding her 6 months sooner than we had planned was a much safer plan than to chance pyometra during her interim heat.*

*When is a bitch too old to breed? Also debated. Friends of mine in Germany had a litter from one of their star bitches when she was 10! Other bitches seem unable to conceive as early as age 6. I make those decisions based on the individual bitch. In general, I think most are ready to retire between age 7- 8.*

*We plan to post a series of articles on commonly debated topics. Some topics don't necessarily have a right or wrong answer: Look for our upcoming article: Where Dogs Live: House vs. Kennel debate (We fall on the side of dogs belonging in the house).*