Puppy Placement Age - *Is it Breeder Rapaciousness or Responsibility?*

By Tamara Dunn

The Irish Wolfhound Club of America's Standard of Behavior has caused controversy with companion owners because of the recommendation that puppies be kept with the breeder, littermates and dam until a minimum of ten weeks of age. Owners are eager to bring their new addition home, so it can be difficult to understand the above and why we have these standards. It's exciting adding a new puppy to the family and frustrating having to wait. We all want the same things for our hounds, for them to be healthy, happy and good citizens in the community. I hope to help new owners understand what breeders are endeavoring to do by waiting until puppies are older to send them home.

From the Standard of Behavior for Breeders, Irish Wolfhound Club of America, approved September 5, 2009, under Care and Sale of a Litter:

> *"The breeder must be prepared to give up 3 months of her/his life to care for the bitch and puppies. The bitch needs supervision and care while in the whelping and nursing phases and the puppies need constant care and socialization from birth until they leave for their new homes at 10–12 weeks."*

I agree with the Standard of Behavior in regards to puppy placement age and will attempt to explain the necessity of the standard's recommendation in this article. I want to send home healthy puppies. This means ensuring puppies are free of testable congenital diseases. A congenital disease is a genetic or structural abnormality present at birth. In the case of our breed, the primary concern is liver shunt, a potentially inheritable disease for which we can easily test. The best age for testing is after eight or nine weeks. Prior to this age there is a greater risk of a false negative[1]. I prefer testing closer to the time the puppies will go home and often test later.

The bile acids test is used to diagnose a potential liver shunt, and the procedure involves fasting puppies for twelve hours. Our preference is to feed a meal at around 8:00 p.m., fast overnight and collect the first blood sample at 8:00 a.m. This sample is the pre-feeding or pre-prandial test. We then feed a small high protein meal, wait two hours and collect blood again. This sample is the post-feeding or post-prandial test. The samples are sent to the lab where they will be evaluated for bile acid levels in the blood. In the pre-feeding test the liver is "at rest" and should show a low bile acid level. The liver responds to meals by telling the gall bladder to release bile acids. The bile acids assist in the digestion of the fats, and the liver will then "reclaim" the bile acids and return them to the gall bladder. If the bile acid concentration in the blood is too high this means the liver is not working properly to reclaim and return the bile acids to the gall bladder. There are a number of diseases of the liver that can cause increased bile acid concentration; this is why most veterinarians will want to investigate with further testing before definitively saying a puppy has a shunt.

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If you want to understand why it's important to wait to test you need to understand a little about liver shunts. The interior shunt is a natural occurrence in the puppy while in the womb. The mother's liver does the work of moving waste and toxins for her unborn infants. She is functioning for both herself and ALL of her puppies. The puppies' livers are growing and developing and aren't prepared to take on the workload of their little bodies. The need for the mother to process all of these toxins is why proper feeding and care of the bitch is important. You don't want

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her body to work any harder during gestation than it is already.

The intrahepatic shunt (interior portal vein) is the most common shunt in our breed and should close at birth, allowing the liver to take over the job of moving toxins out of the puppy's body. If this fails to happen we have a congenital intrahepatic shunt. If the puppy forms an additional, unnecessary shunt on the outside of the liver it's called an extrahepatic shunt. If this happens, it won't matter if the interior portal vein closes, we still have a shunt moving blood around the liver rather than through it.

Shunts can vary greatly, from a partial closure of the interior portal vein with the puppy's liver doing some of the work of removing toxins, to no closure at all. If the shunt is large symptoms can be seen as early as four to five weeks. Symptoms include an unwillingness to eat, weight loss, vomiting, diarrhea, head pressing, circling and other neurological signs. If there is a partial closure, or an extrahepatic shunt that is quite small, symptoms may not be seen until later, or may be confused with another illness. There are two reasons for this: first, the puppy's liver is initially quite large in comparison to his size at birth. The liver begins growing when the interior portal vein closes and is often fully formed by two to four months of age. This is why we can't test until at least eight weeks when the liver has matured. The increased size of the puppy's liver can compensate for a minor shunt for a while, allowing it to remain "hidden"

Critical Periods In Puppy Development

Neonatal Period (0 - 12 Days): The puppy responds only to warmth, touch, and smell. He cannot regulate body functions such as temperature and elimination.

Transition Period (13 - 20 Days): Eyes and ears are open, but sight and hearing are limited. Tail wagging begins and the puppy begins to control body functions.

Awareness Period (21 - 28 Days): Sight and hearing functions well. The puppy is learning that he is a dog and has a great deal of need for a stable environment.

Canine Socialization Period (21 - 49 Days): Interacting with his mother and littermates, the pup learns various canine behaviors. He is now aware of the differences between canine and human societies.

Human Socialization Period (7 - 12 Weeks): The pup has the brain wave of an adult dog. The best time for going to a new home. He now has the ability to learn respect, simple behavioral responses: sit, stay, come. Housebreaking begins. He now learns by association. The permanent man/dog bonding begins, and he is able to accept gentle discipline and establish confidence.

Fear Impact Period (8 - 11 Weeks): Try to avoid frightening the puppy during this time, since traumatic experiences can have an effect during this period. As you can see, this period overlaps that of the previous definition and children or animals should not be allowed to hurt or scare the puppy -- either maliciously or inadvertently. It is very important now to introduce other humans, but he must be closely supervised to minimize adverse conditioning. Learning at this age is permanent. This is the stage where you wonder if your dog is going to be a woosy butt all his life. Also introducing your puppy to other dogs at this time will help him become more socialized. If available in your area, a doggy day care is great for this.

Seniority Classification Period (13 - 16 Weeks): This critical period is also known as the "Age of Cutting" - cutting teeth and cutting apron strings. At this age, the puppy begins testing dominance and leadership. Biting behavior is absolutely discouraged from thirteen weeks on. Praise for the correct behavior response is the most effective tool. Meaningful praise is highly important to shape positive attitude.

Flight Instinct Period (4 - 8 Months): During this period puppies test their wings- they will turn a deaf ear when called. This period lasts from a few days to several weeks. It is critical to praise the positive and minimize the negative behavior during this time. However, you must learn how to achieve the correct response. This period corresponds to teething periods, and behavioral problems become compounded by physiological development chewing.

Second Fear impact period (6 - 14 Months): Also called, "The fear of situations period", usually corresponds to growth spurts. This critical age may depend on the size of the dog. Small dogs tend to experience these periods earlier than large dogs. Great care must be taken not to reinforce negative behavior. Force can frighten the dog, and soothing tones serve to encourage his fear. His fear should be handled with patience and kindness, and training during this period puts the dog in a position of success, while allowing him to work things out while building self-confidence.

Maturity (1 - 4 Years): Many breeds, especially giant breeds, continue to grow and physically change well beyond four years of age. The average dog develops to full maturity between 1-1½ years and 3 years of age. This period is often marked by an increase in aggression and by a renewed testing for leadership. During this time, while testing for leadership, the dog should be handled firmly. Regular training throughout this testing period, praise him for the proper response. Giving him no inroads to affirm his leadership will remind him that this issue has already been settled.

Courtesy of Canine Companions for Independence

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until the puppy's body grows to the point the liver just can't keep up. In this scenario the puppy may not test positive until later. However, most shunts are caught if tested around nine to ten weeks of age. This means that a reputable and responsible breeder can miss a shunt, even if proper testing procedures are followed. This is my primary reason for waiting to place puppies and for waiting to test.

Other giant breeds differ in their Code of Ethics for breeders. However, although liver shunt is seen in all breeds, not all of these breeds are at as high a risk of livershunt, whereas the incidence in wolfhounds is variously reported as between 1 and 6 percent amongst the studies conducted. Nevertheless, these reputable breeders will still wait until ten to twelve weeks to send puppies home. They want to keep puppies with the dam and litter to maximize emotional and structural development. They also want to maximize important lessons and behaviors that can only be learned from their dam and siblings on how to be good members of the canine community.

This brings us to the second reason to wait, evaluation of breed type. The goal of breeding SHOULD be continuation of the breed, and breeders who want to make good decisions for the future will do so between eight to twelve weeks of age. Their choices ensure the continued qualities of the breed, and they should make good choices. It shouldn't matter if they're producing puppies for conformation or companionship; they need to spend time with the litter. It's just as important to have the healthiest and most emotionally well-adjusted companion puppy representing the breed, as it is to have the most structurally correct puppy. This step is essential to ensuring the breed remains the one we know and love.

My final reason is proper puppy placement. The temperament of the puppies should match the temperament of the new family. The puppies are just beginning to develop their personal world views at eight weeks, and it would be impossible to responsibly decide the best home for them at this point. There is also a critical fear period from eight to eleven weeks in which they shouldn't face any traumatic experiences; moving locations falls into this category. See "Critical periods in puppy development" from Canine Companions for Independence on page 8.

These are the reasons I keep puppies later, with liver shunt testing my priority. It's heart breaking to send a new puppy to an excited family as a treasured companion only for it to fall critically ill within the first year of life. Liver shunt is a problem in our breed with a complicated pattern of inheritance. Many breeders across many lines have dealt with it, and it could happen to anyone. There are concerns with the cost of testing, and admittedly it's expensive, but what are the costs of not testing? I feel it's cheap compared to the stress and pain the new family and the puppy go through when given liver shunt as a diagnosis.

About the Author: Tamara Dunn has worked in veterinary medicine for nearly thirty years, beginning with shelter medicine in Texas, as a Licensed Veterinary Technician in Washington, in zoo medicine in Illinois, and in laboratory medicine. Tamara moved into veterinary practice management and training and development of veterinary associates and veterinary trainers. She has owned, shown, lure coursed and bred Irish Wolfhounds since 1991. A past IWCA board member, Tamara now serves as president of the Irish Wolfhound Association of the Mid South.

[1] See Karen M. Tobias, DVM's excellent booklet *"Help! My dog was diagnosed with a liver problem!"* which is available online at *www.vet.utk.edu/clinical/sacs/shunt/MVD-Brochure-FINAL2013-04-10.pdf*

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