



# BMDCA Info Series

## A BMD Puppy's First Year

2009 #5

**Introduction** ► The first days, weeks and months of your puppy's life are critical to shaping the adult it will become. The breeder's contribution to your pup's future began when he or she selected the puppy's parents. Hopefully that breeder was conscientious and studied information about health, breed type and temperament and then made a wise breeding decision. Another important individual in your puppy's health and welfare is your veterinarian, who will work with you throughout the dog's life. You, however, will make or break your dog's future. To fulfill the responsibility that you have taken on, it is essential that you understand puppy development and the ongoing requirements for health, training and general care-giving. Regular exercise, a healthy diet, a clean, dry, well-ventilated and adequately heated or cooled environment and regular veterinary care are essential to maintain a dog's health. Just by petting a dog, looking regularly at its overall condition – weight, teeth, nails, coat, eyes, and ears, and observing the dog's disposition and demeanor, an owner usually can judge how a dog is feeling and whether the dog is in good health. Owners who are attentive and take care of their dogs' daily needs are most likely to observe the signs of good or failing health.

**Early Puppy Development** ► Dogs, like people, go through identifiable developmental phases. Each phase has its requirements and characteristics in terms of physical needs, behavior and development. From the beginning of the learning phase at three weeks to twenty-four weeks of age, the character of the dog is formed. Inherited traits through responsible breeding and an environment that provides healthy and sound developmental stimuli and support will help the dog realize its full potential. As the puppy's owner, you play a critical role in this process.

- The **Neonatal Period** consists of the first 13 days of a pup's life. During this time, the pup's mother is the most important figure, for she provides food, warmth and more.
- Days 13-21 are described as the **Transitional Period**. Again, "Mom" is key. During this time the pups begin to hear, respond to taste, smell, crawl, explore, and play with their littermates.
- The **Awareness Period** occurs in days 21-23. This is a critical time of rapid sensory development, and it is important not to overload the pup's senses.
- **Canine Socialization** occurs in days 21-49. This is when a puppy learns that it is a dog and how to act appropriately to canine stimulation. It will learn manners such as bite inhibition from its mother and littermates. Puppy aptitude testing may be done at 7 weeks/49 days but not before or the results may be invalid.

- **More Socialization** occurs in days 50-84. Strong learning tendencies continue beyond week seven. And what puppies learn will have a lasting impression on them. Pups are very susceptible to fear-inducing stimuli between 8 and 11 weeks. Any traumatic, painful or frightening experiences during this time can make a life-long impression on a puppy.
- **Seniority Classification** occurs between 12 and 16 weeks. This is the time when puppies begin to test their boundaries of dominance.
- **Flight Instinct Period, Adolescence and FEAR revisited** start at 16 weeks and last through 6 months or longer. The second fear imprinting period is similar to the first but is much less defined. Dogs may become fearful as they approach something new or something that is completely familiar to them. Don't force the issue of approaching something that the pup finds frightening. Also, do not cuddle or baby the dog. The best approach is to be patient, kind and understanding and try to desensitize the situation by turning it into a positive experience.

These brief notes should help you appreciate the complexity of a puppy's development. Do yourself and your pup a great favor and read more about this topic. Be sure you are shaping a well-developed dog in all that you do.

**Exercise And Bernese Puppies** ► Puppies need regular supervised exercise in a safe, "dog friendly" outside area to maintain healthy muscle tone and condition. Activities undertaken such as walking, running, swimming and gentle playing should be based on the puppy's physical condition and individual exercise capabilities. Exercise should never be forced (like jogging or extended rough playing). Unsupervised exercise and play with older or larger dogs can easily injure a puppy and may cause permanent damage to muscles, tendons and bones. Young puppies need regular trips outside for housebreaking purposes. A young puppy's physical development makes it impossible for the pup to retain waste for long periods of time. With consistent training, housebreaking should typically be accomplished by 8 months of age at the latest.

**Bernese And Diet** ► A new puppy relies on its owner to provide a healthy diet. A good quality diet that will allow for optimal development and steady growth maximizes a puppy's chances to grow into a healthy adult Bernese. A pup's breeder, because of his or her experience with raising puppies, should recommend what kind of food is best and in what amount.

- Puppies are generally fed three times a day until they are at least 3-6 months of age. Adult Berners are usually fed twice a day. Feeding a large amount of food at one feeding can

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potentially lead to bloat. Fresh water should be available throughout the day.

- Typically, one should wait at least an hour – and some recommendations are at least two hours – after your dog eats before exercise. Allowing your dog at least half an hour – and preferably at least an hour – to recover from exercise before feeding it is recommended.
- Many BMD breeders feed a low- to moderate-protein diet to growing Berners and adults so that growth and weight can be kept steady and slow. Large breed dogs can grow very rapidly, and accelerated growth rate is not desirable as it places greater strain on immature muscles and tendons that must support a large-boned growing pup.

**BMD Puppy Healthcare** ► An owner should arrange for vet care before purchasing a pup. As part of the purchase agreement, the breeder should offer a several-day guarantee for a health checkup to be performed by the owner's vet. This is the first of many appointments your puppy will have during its first year of life. And annual check-ups thereafter must be part of a good healthcare plan. During the initial exam the vet will:

- Listen to the pup's heart for any abnormalities. (Some mild heart murmurs will dissipate as the pup develops, but some are more severe.) Any abnormalities should be noted and reported to the breeder.
- Check the eyes including the eyelids to make sure they fit well around the eye.
- Check the ears for cleanliness and the teeth for bite. How the upper and lower teeth fit together and the presence of all the teeth should be noted. Severe occlusion abnormalities may present challenges to the health of the mouth.
- Ensure your male pup has two testicles in the scrotum. Retained testicles present a more difficult neuter surgery at considerably more expense to the owner.
- Note any gross structural abnormalities. These might include things like front legs that are close together at the carpal joints with the foot toeing out dramatically, similar to a Basset Hound. The hock or rear ankle joint should be well bent. Too-straight angulation in the rear may cause your vet to feel the hock joint for laxity. If your puppy is terribly cow-hocked (hock joints almost touching when standing), your vet may want to check the stifles (knees) to see if they are already loose. They should be tightly fit.
- Take a fecal sample and check for intestinal parasites. Because a puppy is negative on exam day does not mean it will be in a couple of weeks. So when making a return visit to the vet for vaccinations, it may be a good idea to check again. The life cycle of intestinal parasites is such that they may not be evident at all stages. Parasites like coccidia and giardia cause projectile diarrhea and are sometimes present in a well puppy. With the stress of relocation, however, the pup's taxed immune system may allow the parasite to upset the intestinal tract. Watery diarrhea in a young pup is a serious matter and should be checked by a vet, or the pup may dehydrate in a day or two.
- Look for evidence of fleas or ticks. Tapeworms, an intestinal parasite, are contracted when a dog ingests a flea. It is important to manage external parasites throughout your dog's life.

- Note whether your puppy has an umbilical hernia (UH). These are common in Bernese – so common, in fact, that many breeders consider them insignificant. Umbilical hernias are often hereditary or may be caused by trauma at birth, and the textbooks teach that such animals should not be used for breeding. However, it is very, very common for Berners with umbilical hernias to be used for breeding. They don't usually cause problems for the dog, and repairing them is considered by some to be a cosmetic surgery. Some hernias, however, are quite large and need repair. If a pup has a hernia, it should be revealed to you before purchase so you can discuss the risk with your vet.
- Check your pup's vaccination record provided by the breeder. The vet may want to vaccinate the pup right away. It is highly recommended that an owner discuss vaccinations with the pup's breeder BEFORE obtaining the puppy. Too many vaccines too close together can stress a baby pup unduly. Not having the proper vaccinations can put a pup at risk in YOUR area of the country whereas it may not have been at such high risk in the breeder's area. Certain vaccines are commonly used in areas with high incidence of some diseases, whereas they are not used in areas where that disease rarely presents itself. Communicating about vaccinations with a puppy's breeder and the pup's new vet prior to the pup's arrival is a good idea. Vaccines should ONLY be given to a dog that is in good health. In general it is a good idea not to give a rabies vaccine in a vet visit at which a combo vaccine or other vaccine is given to avoid vaccine reactions that can and do occur.

**Spay/Neuter** ► Spay/neuter protects a dog from developing diseases associated with the reproductive system, which can be life-threatening. Reproductively intact females can develop pyometra (uterine infection and inflammation) and are at greater risk for developing breast tumors. Intact males can develop prostatic disease or testicular cancer, particularly if one or both testicles are not descended into the scrotum. While most puppies are placed before spaying or neutering has occurred, early spay/neuter in puppies before they are placed, while not yet common practice, is gaining popularity with some breeders. Most dogs and bitches that are not going to be used as breeding dogs are spayed or neutered after six months and before one year of age. Spay/neuter requires the use of anesthetic. Because some Bernese have had serious reactions to anesthesia, a dog's veterinarian should be asked politely by its owner to proceed with caution when giving anesthetic to any BMD. Spayed females and neutered males make excellent companion animals, as generally they are not subject to the potentially disruptive behaviors associated with reproduction such as excitability when exposed to the opposite sex, scent marking, male or female dominance or aggression and roaming to locate a mate. A responsible breeder will have a provision in his/her contract about how spay/neuter is to be handled with respect to the puppy you have purchased.

**Final Thoughts** ► Your puppy's well-being and quality of life are in your hands. For more information, review the health-related materials on the BMDCA website. Read **BMDCA Info Series – Health Issues In BMDs**. Purchase books for your home library that address health and first-aid topics. Subscribe to **The Alpenhorn**, a BMDCA periodical that regularly contains information on health, training, and general Berner care.