



Helping Swimmer Puppies All the Tips We Could Find

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A UABR breeder recently shared with us her struggle to save a "swimmer" puppy. For 10 weeks she tried everything, but ultimately lost the pup. It was doubly sad because a woman had offered to take her as an indoor pet/forever friend, despite her disability.



In loving Memory | Tammy's Swimmer

So we thought it would be handy to share all the current advice we could find on swimmer puppies and how to help them. And we'd love to hear from you in our [Facebook group](#) (UABR BREEDERS) if you have anything to add to the discussion.

Here's what Swimmer Puppy Syndrome looks like:



What's going on when a pup shows this problem?

The puppy has a flattened ribcage/chest and difficulty getting its legs under it for proper mobility. It typically becomes evident between 2 and 4 weeks of age, but an alert breeder can spot it at 2 days. As the ribs bow out, the heart and other organs may be pushed into the pleural cavity and displace or decrease the air volume of the lungs; as a result, untreated pups become lethargic, lacking in energy and strength.

By the third to fourth week, when normal pups would be running around, affected pups have not yet learned to push themselves up into a standing position. If the extended limbs, especially front legs, are moved at all, it is with a paddling motion to the sides, hence the name of the disorder. The hind legs typically are extremely weak; they may be tucked under the torso, or less frequently extend behind the pup, but in either case they have little or no movement.

"Swimmers" have very poor circulation, respiration, and ability to swallow food or keep milk in their stomachs, and as they are old enough to wean, are very slow when eating from pans. Stifles may be rotated underneath the belly, patellas are often luxated, and other orthopedic or osteochondral defects may be noted.

Many die from inhalation pneumonia (from inspirating regurgitated milk) or other forms of respiratory failure. If swimmers are not given some sort of therapy, there is a less than even chance they will survive to eight weeks. Generally, those that do manage to live, only begin to walk at or after this age. Some are still weak walkers at 6 months of age. There is a similar condition that happens to kittens, and is treated in similar ways.

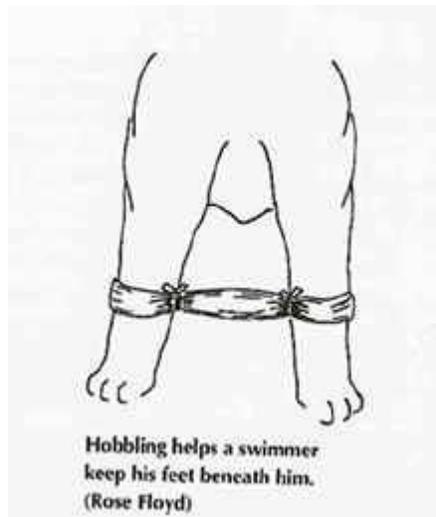
Causes?

There are a lot of ideas. Basically, the bones of newborn pups are super elastic, so the most common theory on swimmers is that they were permitted to lay flat on their belly while nursing, compressing and flattening their ribcage and splaying out their legs. A common solution is to tip the pups onto their sides while nursing. Here are other possible causes:

- Overheating, especially from heating pads when the weather is mild. Lazy, well fed, overweight puppies are more prone to become swimmers.
- Overfeeding. A dam who has a plentiful supply of milk and keeps feeding the puppies non stop-- it affects every breed, particularly short legged dogs.
- Inherited genetics
- Inherited inner ear malfunction (inability to position its body normally)
- Excessive milk consumption - due to a mother with a great deal of milk willing to stay in the whelping box for long stretches. This may be what accounts for repeated litters of swimmers from one bitch.
- Flat whelping box - no way for a puppy to alter pressure on the rib cage by crawling up onto a toy or something similar.
- Temperature in room too warm - puppies are content to lie in one position and not move around looking for a warm spot.

What we can try:

- If pup has aspiration pneumonia from the pressure on their lungs and stomach, antibiotics and cold nebulization may be needed.
- Watch for constipation as well
- Turn pups frequently when nursing and sleeping
- Keep pups a bit cooler
- Remove the dam more often
- Let the pups crawl back to mother before you position them at a nipple
- Provide an egg-crate foam base (covered) to give puppies traction and a surface that is not solid/slippery
- Or, wad up newspaper balls under their blanket to create a similar lumpy/soft surface
- Lay pup belly-up in your lap a few times a day and "bicycle" with the front legs, then the back.
- Make hobbles to prevent legs from splaying out. Half-inch adhesive tape or bias tape (sewing notion) or gauze works. Must be snug but not tight.



- Provide water swimming therapy. Hold him in your hand or a sling, with support to keep his head up out of the water, and let him paddle for a while in warm water (probably around 75 to 80 degrees F to prevent chilling), but take him out and dry him thoroughly if he tires (see Amazing Mick video, scroll down)
- Hold pup in a sling several times a day, suspending his torso and encouraging his feet to contact the floor



- Make a tube for the pup's torso, to prevent further flattening and compression of the inner organs and the help the pup roll on its side. Best material is plastic pipe lined with cotton



- **NEWEST!** Cover the whelping box floor (and later a play area) with rubberized shelf liner material for superior traction. This has been reported to have wonderful results! [Read it here.](#)



- Slip a sock over the pup's torso and stuff it with cotton stuffing, to reduce pressure on ribs/organs and encourage rolling onto side



- We don't know the cause. We don't know a guaranteed cure. But with constant attention and determination, many breeders have rehabilitated swimmer pups that now enjoy life like their littermates. Here's one happy ending:

Amazing Mick

