

The Science of Tube Feeding

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Tube feeding, in my opinion, is a combination of art and science. I will provide the scientific information needed for successful tube feeding and the art will develop as you become more proficient with the procedure. It is in this area where there is simply no substitute for experience.

At the onset, I want to stress the importance of working with a person who is experienced in tube feeding before you undertake this procedure on your own. Scout though all the people you know who are breeding dogs, irrespective of the size of the breed, until you find someone who has "been tube feeding for years." There is simply no substitute for working with someone who has this invaluable expertise.

If you are going to use tube feeding as a supplement, a simple formula of goats milk diluted in half with distilled water is excellent. If your bitch cannot provide any nourishment for the pups, one of the commercially prepared puppy formulas is more appropriate. In either event, for a pup weighing from 3 1/2 to 6 1/2 ounces you would want to start with just 1 or 2 ccs every 4 to 6 hours. It has been my personal experience that the #10 French catheter works very well, but please check with your own vet before deciding. The only equipment needed for one pup is one syringe, one feeding tube, a permanent marking pen, a towel, a small bowl of warm water, some cotton balls and your formula.

Before you go to get the pup, find a chair in your home with an adjacent table, preferably in a room away from the dam, as she may get very agitated should the pup protest. Assemble all your equipment on the table next to your chair. Then get the pup. Place him on the towel in your lap, and locate his last rib. Placing the end of your feeding tube at this last rib, measure to the tip of his nose. When you've located the spot on the tube which touched the tip of his nose, place a mark there with your permanent marking pen. It is important that you remember to continue re-measuring and re-marking as the pup grows.

Now withdraw the proper amount of formula into the syringe. Place the feeding tube onto the syringe and depress the plunger until the formula fills the feeding tube. This prevents air from going into the stomach of the pup. Place your left hand around the back of the pup's head and allow your finger and thumb to touch the corners of his mouth. Holding the head upwards, gently press the corners of his mouth until he opens and then slowly begin inputting the feeding tube with the right hand. Allow the natural inclination of the pup to swallow to assist you with the insertion of the tube. Once you have reached your "marker" on the feeding tube, stop immediately. Holding the tube in place with the left hand from behind the head, use your right hand to slowly depress the plunger of the syringe. Once completely depressed, slide the feeding tube out of the pup's mouth.

At this point, if I have a pup who seems particularly weak, I place a droplet of corn syrup on the tongue. Please check with your vet before you decide if you pup needs this additional nutrition.

Now that the feeding is accomplished, it's time to "burp" the baby. This maneuver consists of wetting one of the cotton balls in your bowl of warm water and massaging both the anus and the penis or vulva until the puppy eliminates. This is an important step, so don't overlook it. Mamma will probably do it over again, but she may not, so it is your job to see that all ends well (pun intended).

If you are doing more than one puppy you will need a feeding tube and a syringe for each.

After feeding the instruments should be washed in detergent and very hot water. It is critical to thoroughly rinse everything so no residue remains anywhere. Once you have become used to doing this and have your routine down pat, you can usually feed 4 puppies in under 10 minutes - including the clean up process.

I realize tube feeding is not for everyone, and can be fatal if not done properly. For this reason, I close my article with the same advice as I opened with. Please do not try this until you've had an "apprenticeship" under someone knowledgeable in the art and science of tube feeding.