

TAIL BITING:

Reflections of a multi-factorial problem

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Swine production is a very intensive and complex system, with different and dynamic sections. Each section needs to be managed to run smoothly for overall efficiency and profitability. If something goes wrong, it can affect the profitability of the whole farming enterprise. One such challenge is tail biting.

Tail and ear biting is a multi-factorial problem. It is usually a combination of unfavourable conditions, which results in pigs biting each other. The most obvious reason is that pigs that are unhappy or under stress will eventually show inclinations to bite each other. There are different places where pigs will bite and these are usually the tails, then ears and then also what is called flank-biting.

When biting does occur, it is important to try and find the main cause or trigger, so that this can be fixed to prevent future biting occurring in a specific house or age period. Where to start looking for the problem is always a good question, but a multi-faceted approach is needed.

The following aspects need to be assessed:

Environment

- Ventilation – is it too cold or too hot?
- Airflow within the house and presence of pockets of ammonia?
- Is there enough space in the pen for the number of pigs?
- Is there enough feeder space per unit of time?
- Are there enough water drinkers available?
- Placement of feeders and drinkers.

Health

- What is the disease status of the farm?

- Are the pigs being vaccinated and was this done correctly?
- What disease signs are being observed within a biting group of pigs?
- Sick pigs are unhappy pigs, leading to the occurrence of biting.

Nutrition

- Is the diet balanced correctly according to the nutritional requirements of the animal?
- Is the feed being mixed correctly and the appropriate vitamin-mineral premix included in the diet?
- Are any of the ingredients being used in the feed of poor quality? For example, was a batch of soya oilcake meal received either over- or under-processed?
- Are there mycotoxins present in the feed and if so, which mycotoxins and at what levels?
- Is feed always available, or do “out-of-feed” events occur, especially during the night?
- Is there mouldy or stale/sour wet feed in the feeders?
- Is the quality and freshness of the water acceptable?
- If drinker bowls are being used, are they clean and free of faeces?

What can be done to decrease the incidence of tail, ear and flank-biting?

- It is important to quickly find the main cause and rectify it for long-term improvements.
- Many products can be used as a “patch/plaster” to decrease the incidence.
- In-feed additives, which reduce the stress on the animals, can help.
- Toys, chains, empty bags or empty plastic containers can be added to the pigs’ pens, to get them to play/chew and thus decrease physical biting.

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- With many of these in-feed products or toys, it is important to start using them before the pigs start to bite. Once they start to bite, the addition of such toys and in-feed additives have limited success.

Treatment of affected pigs:

- Attend to and treat the pigs that are bitten as soon as possible.
- If possible, remove the bitten pigs out of the group as quickly as possible, to decrease further biting incidence.
- Consult your veterinarian for treatment protocols and medications.
- There are different types of ointments that can be applied onto the bitten areas. Find the right one for your circumstances.
- If tail biting is left untreated it could lead to infection in the spinal cord, resulting in lame-

ness and also pigs being condemned on the slaughter line.

- The quicker it is treated, the less financial losses could be expected.

It is important to follow a holistic approach on-farm, with a very good communication system between farm manager, veterinarian, nutritionist and genetic supplier. When they work together as a team the efficiency and on-farm profitability can be increased.

Visit www.agrifarmacysa.co.za for more information on tail biting and contact the author on 082 821 5991 or send an email to fred@feedtek.co.za. For more information on home-mixing of pig feeds, visit www.feedtek.co.za.



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