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Managing & Processing Newborn Piglets

Swine Newsletter

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Warmth

Over half of preweaning death losses occurs in the first 72 hours after birth. Piglets are born with a body temperature of 38.8 °C to 40 °C (102°F to 104°F), but they lose body heat rapidly. When piglets are born, they somehow know to walk around mother's leg, find the udder and nurse. Newborns normally get to their feet within 1-2 minutes and suckle within 15 minutes. It is hard to predict which way the sow will lay, and that is why I like to see a heat lamp hanging on both sides of the farrowing crate at the back of the creep areas. These heat lamps help to keep the piglets warm, and they nurse better!

Drying agents help to speed up drying and thereby helps the piglets hold their body temperature. But, I really do like at least one heat lamp at the back of the farrowing crate at farrowing time and preferably two! Once the farrowing is over and the piglets are nursing then move one heat lamp forward over the pad that you expect the piglets to sleep on. If the pad is heated then you can turn the heat lamp off in a couple days. If the pad is not heated then the lamp should stay on and be raised higher as the piglets get older. The only time that a nursing litter doesn't need this extra "micro-environment" heat is on those very hot humid days in the summer when the room temperature is 32°C (90°F).

Note: If you aren't using a pad of some kind then get them!

Note: Piglets need a micro environment that is very warm (32°C); whereas, the sow like it about 21 to 23° C (70 to 74°F).

Note: One new strategy that several of our clients are using to help prevent neonatal piglet scours is to put ¼ to ½ of a cup of Potato Starch on the pad daily for 5 days after birth. They lick away at this starch and it binds them up so that they resist scouring.

Colostrum

A good dose of colostrum is the single most important factor related to piglet health and survival. This "first-milk" is rich in disease-preventing immunoglobins. Most piglets consume twice the amount of colostrum needed within their first 12 hours of life, so farrowing room attendants should focus on helping the smaller, at-risk piglets. Some methods to ensure pigs receive adequate colostrum include:

- Split Suckling – After the largest pigs have nursed, remove them from the litter and place in a heated box for 1-2 hours. Give the sow ½ cc to 1 cc of oxytocin and allow small pigs to nurse. Repeat this procedure in the morning and afternoon of the first 24 hours period after farrowing.
- Wipe small pigs dry and warm them for 5-10 minutes before allowing them to suckle.

- To collect colostrum, remove piglets from the sow for 1 hour, give her ½ to 1 cc of oxytocin, wait 1-2 minutes, then strip teats to obtain colostrum. Store and freeze colostrum in ice cube trays. Do not thaw cubes in microwave.
- Stomach tubing – Give 10-15 cc dose of milk to disadvantaged pigs via syringe with stomach tube; apply lubricant to tube before inserting 6-7 inches into pig's stomach.

Cross Fostering Guidelines

Ideally, piglets would nurse their own mother for 4 to 6 hours before cross fostering. However, so long as they get that all important dose of first milk from mother or another sow that is also farrowing at the very same time they will be ok. Note: the amount and quality, and availability of those immunoglobins change the longer the sow is fresh, so don't put a newborn directly onto a sow that farrowed 8 hours earlier! Let them get their colostrum from their own mother.

Focus on the smaller, weaker piglets that have not found their own teat. Match pigs for size, weight and number according to nurse sows capacity to milk. Choose small, docile nurse sows with small slender nipples of medium art. Some herdsmen are better at this than others.

Do not cross-foster gilts if they are to be notched or tattooed and kept for breeding stock.

Do not cross-foster healthy pigs into sick litters. Only cross-foster during the piglets first 24 hours after birth.

Identifying Disadvantaged Pigs

Comfortable piglets should lie in a prone position, gently touching each other.

Disadvantaged pigs include:

- Lightweight pigs – Less than 2 3/4 lb. at birth
- Chilled Pigs – Piling, fluffy hair coats and shivering are signs of chilling. Chilled pigs can be warmed quickly by submerging them to the neck in 90° F water for 5-10 minutes; dry completely; provide supplemental heat (85-95° F).
- Slow-to-nurse pigs - Tape legs about 1 inch apart to stabilize the legs or tape legs up under the belly so pigs can still get the sow's udder. Within 24-48 hours, they usually gain the stability needed to compete and nurse better.
- Anemic pigs – grayish-white appearance; these pigs are oxygen-deprived.
- Physical trauma – bitten, stepped on, laid on by the sow.

Pig Processing

Perform as soon as the litter has stabilized – usually within the first three days after birth.

- Navel care – Disinfecting newly severed navels may be beneficial; if navel is collapsed or dry, don't bother.
- Identification – Ear notch or tattoo (maybe necessary for accurate record keeping).
- Iron shots – Pigs are born with limited iron reserves and sow's milk is a poor iron source. Normal iron dextran contains 100 mg of iron/cc. At 3 to 4 days of age, inject 200 mg in pig's neck using a 20 gauge, ½ inch needle.
- Castration – Allow ample time for male pigs to recover from the birthing process and establish a good nursing pattern (3 to 5 days of age).
- Clip tails – Leave at least 1/2 inch.
- Clip needle teeth (optional) – the canine or "eye" teeth are very sharp; use a sharp side cutter to clip tips of teeth only; do not clip too close to the gum.