



FACT SHEET ON TAIL BITING IN PIGS

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- Tail-biting occurs from time to time in all types of housing, on both slatted floors and solid floors, and whether or not straw bedding is present.
- The docking of tails does not necessarily prevent the problem, but it can certainly reduce the incidence.
- The design of the pig pen can influence the frequency of aggressive behaviour. Tail-biting often occurs in pens that are rectangular rather than square and when feed and water sources are placed against the shorter wall. The problem seems to increase as the ratio of the length of the long side to the short side increases.
- A pig will establish its own “comfort zone” within the pen. If this zone is threatened or impinged upon, the pig dominating that zone will act aggressively. Draughts can alter the shape and area of the total comfort zone, forcing some pigs to seek a new zone. Pigs lower in the hierarchy tend to use insidious methods such as tail-biting to gain their territory rather than full confrontation. Therefore the pig that begins tail-biting is often a small pig. Disturbance of the group hierarchy, either by adding or removing pigs, may also lead to a re-distribution of the comfort zone and act as a trigger factor for tail-biting.
- Poor ventilation and therefore poor air quality increases the frequency of aggressive behaviour.
- Variation in climatic conditions increases the frequency of tail-biting, especially draughtiness. Pigs respond to draughts by exhibiting aggressive behaviour. The duration of the aggressiveness is directly proportional to the duration of the draught.
- Pigs housed in a barren environment show greater frequency of aggressive behaviour and tail-biting than pigs housed in an enriched environment.
- An increase in the level of dietary minerals, particularly salt, does not reduce the problem significantly, but, paradoxically, dietary deficiencies might act as a trigger factor for tail-biting.
- Some genetic lines of pigs are naturally more aggressive than others.
- Irritability caused by parasitism and chronic disease, particularly of the alimentary system and including gastric ulceration, is associated with a high frequency of tail-biting.
- The commensal bacteria of the mouths of pigs cause an ascending sepsis of the traumatised tail. Bacteraemia may result which can give rise to multiple micro-abscesses throughout major organs and joint cavities. This causes chronic disease and economic loss through poor growth and carcass condemnation.
- Abscesses in the spinal canal are common problems following a bitten tail are a cause of paraplegia and carcass condemnation.



CHECKLIST FOR PREVENTION OF TAIL BITING

- Maintain minimum ventilation rates at all times.
- Avoid high air speeds at pig level.
- Eliminate draughts.
- Maintain pigs in thermoneutrality as far as possible.
- Improve accessibility for all pigs to feed and water.
- Ensure that the dietary specification is correct for the age of the pigs.
- Ensure that the fibre content and fibre length (particle size) of the feed is adequate.
- Maintain a stable group of pigs.
- Remove offending pigs from the group.
- Reduce stocking density in long rectangular pens.
- Provide toys for pigs to play with and to chew such as alkathene pipe, paper sacks, logs, plastic “footballs”, suspended chains, etc.
- Do not use car tyres as toys – the wire content can become embedded in the tongue or between the teeth.
- Spray pigs with industrial odour solutions if an outbreak occurs.
- Eliminate parasites, both internal and external.
- Control enteric disease.
- Provide a mineral lick block.
- Always give immediate antibiotic treatment to bitten pigs to control sepsis.

