PROCESSING PIGLETS IN THE FARROWING HOUSE

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Since piglets in the farrowing house are easy to handle and monitor, they are typically processed early in life. Processing of piglets normally involves several procedures that may include an injection of supplemental iron, permanent identification (tattoo, tag, or ear notch), trimming umbilical cords, castration, docking tails, and clipping eye teeth. In addition, initial vaccines may be administered at the same time.

A growing pig requires 7-11 mg of iron a day. Pigs are born with a limited reserve of iron (approximately 50 mg) and even with today’s nutrition advancements sows’ milk still only supplies about 1 mg of iron a day.\(^1\) Therefore the pig will run out of iron by seven days of age. As a result it is necessary to provide additional iron to the pig until he is able to eat a diet supplemented with iron. Researchers in the 1980’s established that 200 mg of injectable iron was sufficient to maintain a pig until weaning at 3-4 weeks of age.\(^2,3\) A recent study showed that there is no benefit from giving 300 mg of injectable iron.\(^1\)

Splay leg or spraddle is a condition of extreme adduction of the limbs typically affecting just the hind legs. Spraddle pigs are unable to stand and therefore usually die due to starvation because they cannot reach a teat or compete with littermates or they get laid on by the sow because they are not able to move. Often producers hobble the hind legs in a normal position in order to decrease the chances of the above mentioned outcomes and also to allow the muscles to heal. Pigs that live past the first week of life will usually recover completely.

A half inch wide piece of strong tape can be used to make hobbles for spraddle pigs. The tape should be placed around the right leg approximately half way between the hock and the ankle. Then keeping the legs hip width apart, the tape should be brought to the left leg and wrapped around it at roughly the same height. Finally take the tape back over to the right leg and secure the tape together between the legs. The pig should be checked daily to ensure that the tape is not interfering with circulation or growth and if necessary the tape should be removed and reapplied until correction is obtain at approximately 5-7 days of age.

Castration is often performed at 4-10 days of age because research has shown that delaying castration until after 3 days of life maximizes growth in the suckling period.\(^4\) In addition, pigs are easy to manage at this size and detection of scrotal hernias is relatively simple at a this age. A scrotal hernia or rupture occurs when the intestines protrude into the scrotal sac through the inguinal ring (the opening between the body and the scrotum). When a scrotal rupture is discovered a correctional procedure may be attempted in order to increase the value of the animal at slaughter. There are a variety of methods that may be used to permanently reduce a scrotal hernia. Some examples may include 1) surgical correction to close the inguinal ring or 2) the use of a stabilizer to temporary hold the inguinal ring closed.
Surgical correction is done by twisting the vaginal tunic therefore forcing the intestines back into the abdomen and securing it with an absorbable suture. The inguinal ring is then closed with an absorbable suture and the skin closed as well. This procedure should only be performed by a veterinarian or a skilled herdsman who has a thorough understanding of anatomy.

Elastic tape can be used to stabilize the hernia while the inguinal ring heals. It is a much less invasive procedure and can be performed by farrowing house staff with a basic knowledge of anatomy. The process is 90% effective when performed on pigs that are 3-5 days of age.

The taping procedure is performed while one person holds the pig by his hind legs. First the intestine is gently pushed back into the abdomen and the testicle is removed. The second person then applies Elastakon® tape in a figure eight pattern over each inguinal ring and around the legs. The tape is then secured around the back of the pig. The pig should be checked daily to ensure that the tape is not interfering with circulation or growth and the tape should be removed in 2 days.

References