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Off to the Right Start
Baby Pig Basics

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Many of you will be farrowing pigs in the next few months. The following list is in no way all-inclusive, but may be helpful in getting the baby pigs on the ground and getting them off to a good start.

- 65% of all post-farrowing deaths occur within the first four days of life. 42% of these deaths are caused by crushing or starvation (a primary reason for using a crate or other type of confinement that allows the piglets to escape the dam's weight as she lays down.)

- Baby piglets are born virtually naked immunologically. Their immune system is not up and going yet, causing them to be susceptible to a number of potentially dangerous bacteria and pathogens. Proper disinfection of the farrowing area, thorough rinsing, prevention of drafts and creating a "microenvironment" for the piglets that is around 90 - 95°F are all things that must be considered. The piglet receives passive immunity from the mother during the first few hours after birth in the form of colostrum. This "first milk" is rich in antibodies that give the piglets' immune system a jump-start. The piglets' own immune system will not function at full capacity until after three weeks of age, so this colostrum is very important. Many producers milk a gilt or sow and freeze some colostrum for future use. Cow colostrum and milk replacer can also be used, but are not as effective (milk replacer does not contain antibodies).

- Baby pigs are born with very little body fat. While we use our fat reserves during periods of cold stress, it does not take the baby pig long to deplete what little fat he is born with. Keeping the area draft-free and providing supplemental heating when needed with heated mats or heat lamps will prevent cold stress, which can invite microorganisms to invade an already fragile immune system.

- While the baby pigs like their environment warm, sows do not. A temperature of about 65°F is ideal for the sow. Sows that are too hot do not milk as well and are often agitated enough to get up and down often, increasing the chances of crushing the piglets. Dripping water (not spraying) between the sows shoulder blades at a slow rate (allowing it to trickle down her shoulders and evaporate) can be quite effective in keeping her cool. Fans are great for sows, but can chill the piglets, so if fans are used, care must be taken to keep the piglets out of the draft. Even a warm draft can cause problems in newborns.

off to the right start

- Baby pigs usually weigh between 3.5 and 4.5 pounds at birth. It is a common practice in commercial swine operations to cross-foster piglets to even out the number of piglets per sow, or even to sort by size. If your sows are somewhat synchronized, the piglets can be fostered for up to three days after birth. However, fostering is more successful soon after birth. Unlike cattle or sheep, fostering in swine is relatively easy. Most sows will accept other young, especially if crated. This practice often gives the smaller pigs a better chance of growth and survival, especially if competition by size or number is reduced.

- The sow's udder provides more milk per teat at the front than at the back. This is one reason that you may often notice that the smaller piglets get pushed to the back of the udder during feeding, especially in litters where there is competition for resources. Most litters will develop a "teat order" with the same piglet feeding off of the same teat more often than not. In some cases, a teat order takes longer to be established, isn't as rigid, or may never be developed. The piglets will determine this pecking order themselves.

- Be aware of the condition of the sow's udder, including blunt nipples, pin nipples, mastitis, and sores that can be caused by the sharp needle teeth that the babies are born with. Producers have clipped these needle teeth at birth or shortly after for decades, usually with a pair of sidecutters, to prevent excessive bruising on the udder as well as to the littermates. Care should be taken to clip these teeth straight across and not too low to avoid injuring the gums, potentially causing abscesses. While this is a perfectly acceptable management practice, some of the large commercial operations have recently ceased this practice because of labor constraints.

Proper care of baby pigs helps them reach full genetic potential

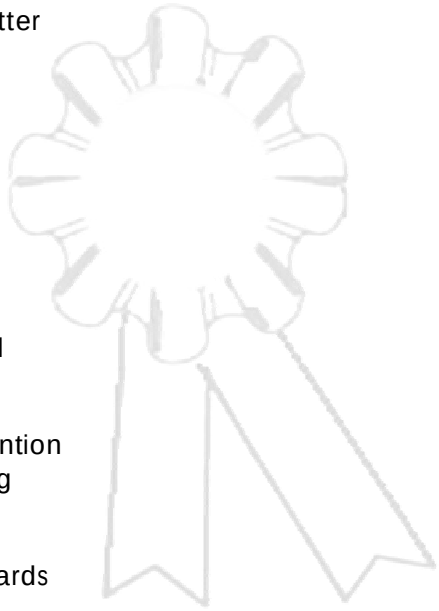
- If sows have been outside, it is a good idea to treat them for external parasites about two weeks prior to farrowing. The sow can pick up parasite eggs from the grass on her underline, which is the first place the piglet goes after he is born. Parasite eggs can be ingested during suckling, transferring the parasites and infecting the newborn.

- It is difficult to determine exactly how much milk a piglet is getting from its dam, but careful daily observation is a good practice to get into and can tell you a lot about the piglets and how they are fairing. Piglets that are hungry will not be as content, will act hungry, or may be lethargic if they have been hungry for too long. Piglet behavior is a good yardstick to measure general health and comfort (temperature/thermoneutral zone) as well. However, it is hard to distinguish behavior unless you know what is considered normal, so spend some time watching when the sow and piglets are not disturbed or distracted to get an idea of what to look for.

- In the commercial industry, litters are processed (iron shots, ear notched, needle teeth and tails clipped, etc.) within hours of birth and males castrated within the next three days. Litters are weaned at 17 – 21 days of age and the sow moved back to breeding and gestation to be put back into production. She will likely return to estrus (standing heat) within 4-7 days and will be mated again. This allows just over two litters to be born per sow per year, increasing production efficiency. In the show pig industry, we may not be as concerned about the sow having another litter in a timely fashion, and will therefore allow her to lactate a little longer. It is still a good idea to process the litter, *including castration*, shortly after birth. The sooner these processes are completed, the easier it is on the overall stress and health of the piglet.

- Iron injections are especially important. Baby pigs are born with a limited supply of iron in their livers and therefore must be supplemented to prevent anemia. Since most pigs are now raised inside and on concrete, they have little or no contact with the soil. While this is great for cleaning and disinfection purposes, it also means that the piglets do not pick up any iron from the dirt, like they would if they were allowed to root. Therefore, iron injections are administere0d *within 3-4 days after birth*, even in litters farrowed and raised outside. If weaning at less than or equal to 21 days of age, a single injection of 100 mg of iron into the neck is sufficient.

- At about one week of age, a creep feed can be introduced to the litter (keeping it out of reach of the sow). A variety of creep feeds are available. Most contain 15 - 20% crude protein and are extremely digestible and palatable to the piglet to encourage them to eat. These creep feeds often contain dried whey, dried skim milk, spray-dried plasma, or fishmeal. The creep feed should be kept fresh and changed often. A sow's milk yield will often start to decline after three weeks of lactation. The litter that has been creep fed may not experience as severe of a drop or lag in post-weaning growth. Additionally, it may be necessary to creep feed large litters, litters from gilts or poor milkers, or if weaning is not going to occur until later than three weeks of age.



As always, being a good livestock manager requires paying attention to details, being observant, keeping everything, including your processing tools, as clean as possible and keeping good records. Piglets that hit the ground running have a much better chance of reaching their genetic potential and performing where you expect them to, propelling you towards a first place finish.

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