

How to Process Piglets

Author:

Christina Phillips, University of Minnesota

Reviewers:

Mark Whitney, University of Minnesota

Introduction

Several management procedures collectively referred to as “processing” need to be performed on baby pigs once they are born. Processing procedures vary among operations but often include clipping needle teeth, docking tails, administering iron and other medication(s), identification of piglets, and castration. These procedures are done to meet either an important biological need of the pig or a management need of the producer. Processing procedures such as clipping needle teeth and iron injections should be performed 24 to 48 hours after birth, so most operations process litters either the first or second day after farrowing. The following procedures can be done on piglets up to 3 days old, with the exception of castration which can be done on days 3-7. The objective of this sheet is to explain how to process piglets and describe why each procedure is performed.

It is important to separate the piglets from the sow so you can process them without the danger and distraction of a protective sow. Also, it is important that after the piglets have been processed they have a dry, clean place to lie in the pen.

Clipping Needle Teeth

Reason:

Pigs are born with eight needle teeth. The main reason for choosing to clip needle teeth is to prevent potential damage to the sow's underline, which may lead to a reluctance of the sow to allow nursing. It can also prevent facial injuries to littermates when fighting over teats. Facial injuries to piglets may allow staphylococcus hyicus (the bacteria that causes greasy pig disease) to enter the body which could lead to the development of this disease.



Caution:

If teeth clipping is not done properly, it may result in damage to the gums or roots of the teeth. Infection can be caused by clipping teeth too close to the gum. Or, if the tool used is dull or broken the tooth may splinter or split down through the roots causing infection. Infection is painful and will prevent the piglet from eating properly.

HOW 01-01-03

The goal is to neatly cut off the sharp tips of the teeth using a small set of sharp, clean side cutters dipped in alcohol, iodine, or a similar antiseptic between each piglet.

Materials required:

Sharp pair of side cutters, small container of antiseptic.

Procedure:

1. Wash cutters in hot soapy water and disinfect before use. Check blades for damage, if evident use another instrument. Always have a spare on hand.
2. Hold each piglet with the third finger placed in the angle of the jaw and the fourth finger across the trachea to suppress squealing.
3. Place the clippers parallel to the jaw bone and clip. Do not point the clippers into the gum.
4. Make sure there are not sharp points left, clean the clippers in preparation for next piglet.

Docking Tails

Reason:

Tail docking is done to prevent tail biting, which causes infection and can lead to development of abscesses in the spine, severe pain, and carcass condemnations at slaughter.



Caution:

Clipping the tail too close to the body may damage the muscles supporting the vulva and anus and cause prolapse. Also, when cutting do not be tempted to leave half of the tail, because tail biting will occur at this length and the procedure will have been useless.

Materials required:

Sharp pair of side cutters or scissors, small container of disinfectant.

Procedure:

1. Wash instruments with hot soapy water and disinfect.
2. Hold the tail into the side cutters or scissors and

- remove with a quick cut. Leave only a half an inch of tail. Dip the stub in sterilizing solution such as iodine.
- Place instrument in disinfectant when not in use.
 - Before putting litter back in pen, check to make sure all bleeding has ceased. Any bleeding should have stopped 30 seconds after the procedure.

Administering Supplemental Iron and Other Medication

Reason:



Sow's milk contains insufficient iron and piglets are born with minimal reserves. Pigs born in the wild or outside get most of the iron they need from rooting in the soil. But when the ground is frozen, those born inside or outside need supplemental iron to prevent anemia. This can be given

by injection or orally. Injection is the preferred method because of the ease of regulating dosage and the ability to insure pigs get as much as they need.

Caution:

Be sure to hold pig correctly and change needles at least every 3 litters or if needle gets damaged.

Materials required:

Iron dextran, syringes, needles 5/8 21-gauge or automatic syringe administering 1 or 2 ml.

Procedure:

- Fill the syringe with iron solution.
- Lift the piglet by the hind leg but keep the leg in line with the body as much as possible. Muscle and tendon damage may occur if the pig is held with the leg at a right angle to the body.
- Administer the injection slightly behind the ear in the muscle on one side of the neck at a 45° angle. Inject either 1 or 2 ml (200 mg).
- Apply pressure momentarily to the injection site.

Identification of Piglets

Reason:

Identification is required for recording and management procedures. Several different methods are used to identify pigs depending on the type of farm: ear notching, tattooing, tagging, transponders, or electric implants.

Methods:

- Ear notching: Use a sterilized ear notching tool and make the notches in the appropriate locations on the ears depending upon the system used.
- Tattooing: Dies on spiked numbers or letters are used. 8mm (5/16") is the size used for piglets 3-21 days. The

ear is the most common site for pigs this age. Green tattoo ink shows best and is retained longer in white skinned breeds for permanent marking.

- Tagging: When tags are inserted in the ear, positioning and hygiene are important. Make sure tags are stored in a clean dust proof container to avoid infection after tagging. Also, make sure instruments are clean and disinfected.
- Transponders: Electronic tags used in automatic feeder systems that can be read by or respond to electronic impulses. They can also be used to store data and be identified at a distance from the pig.
- Electric implants: These are transistors enclosed in very small non-reactive implants. They are placed under the skin at the base of the ear and store a wide variety of information. These are still in their early stages of development.

Castration

Reason:

Castration, or surgical removal of both testicles, is essential to prevent boar taint, which affects the meat's acceptability with consumers.



Caution:

Piglets may be castrated within 7 days after birth. When larger or older pigs need to be castrated, a local or general anesthetic should be used under the direction of a veterinarian.

Materials required:

Surgical blade and handle, antiseptic solution, cotton wool, iodine spray.

Procedure:

- One person hold the piglet between the legs with testicles presented as shown or a stand may be used.
- Raise the testicles to the surface using the thumb and index fingers. Using cotton wool with antiseptic, wipe clean the outside of the testicles.
- Use the scapel to make 2 small incisions, 1 on each testicle.
- Pull the testicles out with a swift tug, or you may also pull them out and cut them away. If there are any strings left behind cut them away.
- Spray with iodine, no sutures are needed.

Reference:

Reese DE, Hartsock TG, Morrow WEM. Baby pig management - birth to weaning. W Lafayette Indiana: Purdue University. Pork Industry Handbook No. 18; 2008.