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## Safe Animal Handling

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### Introduction

Injury to workers and animals can occur with all ages and developmental stages of pigs and during moving, loading or unloading, and processing. Strategies to prevent injuries are reviewed below. Situations and facilities vary and this list is not meant to be inclusive of all prevention and control strategies, but is meant to help stimulate the problem-solving process for producers.

### General Animal Handling

Pigs are under a great deal of stress when they are being transported. When loading and unloading pigs, the animals should be moved as quickly and efficiently as possible. Moving them too quickly, however, can result in injury to both the handler and the animals.

Understanding the natural tendencies of pigs can make transporting pigs much easier. Pigs have a range of vision of nearly 360 degrees. This means that loading ramps and chutes with solid sidewalls will prevent the animals from seeing distractions. Seeing moving objects or people can cause balking, or can frighten the pigs. Blocking vision will stop escape attempts and lower the stress level of the pigs. Pigs also have a tendency to move from a dimly lit area to a brightly lit area; directing a spotlight onto a ramp may facilitate entry.

The number of pigs moved at one time should be limited to a manageable size group. The size of the animals and the physical layout of the work area will determine the number of pigs moved at one time. The number of animals being moved should not exceed the following limits:

- Entering the nursery - 20 pigs
- Entering the finisher: 10 pigs
- Leaving the finisher: 5 pigs
- Breeding stock: 3-5 pigs

The majority of injuries on a hog farm occur during human/animal interaction. It's important to pay close attention to the potential dangers of working with pigs, and always use correct animal handling techniques. Attention to these dangers is a key to personal safety. When handling pigs, remember to:  
DO:

- Know the characteristics of animal vision and hearing.
- Maintain housekeeping.
- Stay calm and touch animals gently.

Be aware of your surroundings and body position in relation to the pigs.  
Maintain even lighting.

**DON'T:**

Expose animals to loud noises and quick movements.  
Clutter alleyways and walking surfaces.  
Enter a small-enclosed area with an animal unless you have an escape route.  
Overcrowd pens or chutes.

## **Farrowing**

Possible hazards to workers in a farrowing house include electrocution, power washing, stressed animals, washing and moving sows into the farrowing area, and fire.

To avoid electrical accidents, workers should:

- Pay close attention to electrical outlets, plugs and cords;
- Never work without shoes, with holes in shoes, or with wet feet; and
- Only perform electrical work they are authorized to do.

Make sure all employees receive training on the proper methods for working around electrical fixtures. This should also include training on the appropriate methods for inspecting the worksite for related hazards and then the development of procedures to report the issues. Make sure that all exposed live electrical parts are promptly repaired when they are identified as damaged or defective. Replace ALL temporary wiring with permanent wiring. Producers have been fined for having extension cords and using temporary yellow romex cords for heaters in farrowing units.

Another potential hazard in the farrowing area is washing and moving sows. Washing sows in small groups makes them easier to handle. Make sure that the washing area is sturdy enough to hold the sows being washed. When entering the wash area, be aware of your position so you do not get pushed or stepped on by other sows.

## **Processing**

Punctures, cuts, and needle stick injuries are among the most common injuries that handlers experience in the processing phase. These can happen when clipping teeth, giving shots, cutting tails, ear notching/tattooing, and castrating.

Workers in large sow complexes may wind up processing several hundred pigs in one day. This requires handlers to remain focused and attentive. Fatigue increases a handler's chances for injury. Encourage your employees to take advantage of scheduled breaks to avoid becoming overtired and to help them stay focused.

## **Injecting Pigs**

Injecting sows in stalls often leads to hand injuries. These occur when a worker reaches into the crate and the sow jumps and catches the person's hand between the crate and her body. A worker's hand or fingers could get crushed without warning.

Workers whose duties involve giving injections to the animals – or administering medication at any time – should be instructed to immediately report any accidental injections of antibiotics or medications to their supervisor. Deaths and severe medical reactions have been reported after accidental injections by humans of certain medications meant for animals. When injecting pigs, remember to:

**DO:**

Take scheduled breaks to avoid fatigue.  
Keep your wrists in a neutral position.  
Read the package insert, label, and MSDS for any medications administered to the pigs, and use the product only as directed on the package.  
Immediately report all accidental needle sticks to your supervisor.

**DON'T:**

- Carry a syringe and needle in your pockets.
- Place your hands between a pig and the side of the stall.

## Breeding

Handling animals during breeding can result in a high number of injuries. Injuries during breeding may occur because the tasks being performed put you in close contact with the pigs, the pigs are very large, or the workspace is tight.

Injuries during this phase of production usually occur when the boar and sow are together. Slippery floor conditions when breeding, due to manure, urine, and semen spillage, may cause the boar to slip. Be sure to keep the pens clean and dry. Some producers use a floor covering to minimize slippage. Also, handlers must make sure they are always aware of their position in relation to the animals. They should position themselves behind the pigs and keep a safe distance. In addition to a slippery floor, a boar may have trouble locking up with a sow. The boar may fall off and injure a worker, if he or she is standing too close.

Boars at times may become aggressive. These times include when a boar is having trouble mounting a sow, after the boar dismounts the sow, if the boar is in close proximity to another boar, and when the boar becomes protective of the sow. When in the proximity of breeding animals, workers should:

- Use of sorting panels.
- Have an escape route if it becomes necessary to quickly get out of the area.
- Never position oneself between the boar and sow.
- Make sure the tusks on the boar are removed.

Injuries can also occur during the artificial insemination of the sow. To stimulate the sow, workers will press or lean on the back of a sow. The worker will then insert the AI rod into the sow. Because these things are done when the sow is in the farrowing crate, it is very important for the worker to be aware of the sow's movements and his or her hands in relation to gates. If the sow jumps and catches a worker's hand between the stall and her body, the worker's hand or fingers could get crushed without warning.

Encourage your workers to remember these safety tips to prevent injuries during the AI process:

- Be aware of your position in the pen and have an escape route.
- Be aware of a sow's movements and your hands in relation to gates.
- Use sorting boards to move animals and protect yourself.
- Be extremely cautious when working around boars.

Occasionally breeding animals will die in a pen or stall. Safe practices when removing a dead breeding animal include:

- Removal as soon as possible. It is increasingly difficult to remove the animal the longer the time period between death and removal.
- Use care not to strain or pull your muscles.
- Use a mechanical device such as a hog cart or hand truck to help with the removal.
- If a mechanical device is not available, use a humane snare or rope to remove the dead animal.
- Workers should not attempt to remove a dead animal by themselves. Encourage them to recruit fellow workers to assist them in this difficult task.

When breeding pigs, remember to:

**DO:**

- Keep pens clean and dry
- Maintain housekeeping
- Position yourself alongside and behind a boar during mounting and semen collection.

**DON'T:**

- Sit down to collect semen.
- Stand too close to the boar during semen collection.
- Position yourself between the boar and sow during breeding.

## Weaning

Workers should be cautious when moving the sows to the breeding area because they can become aggressive. Strive to reduce the risk of injuries such as back and neck strain or slips and falls, which are common at this time. Take advantage of herding instincts and move animals in small, manageable groups. Groups move better by pushing the leader, rather than pushing the whole group from behind.

Encourage your workers to remember these safety tips to prevent injuries while lifting weaned piglets:

- Get assistance where possible.
- When lifting alone, position yourself parallel to the pig you are lifting. Then secure your grip on the outside leg and use the second hand on the other leg. Use the front legs of the pig to help support some of the weight until the pig is in a vertical position
- Remember when lifting a pig this way to make sure the pig's head is positioned so it cannot bring its head back into your face.

## In the Nursery

Lifting the larger pigs in the nursery and moving them from pen to pen exposes workers to back injury risk. This risk of injury increases as the pigs get older and heavier. Workers should always perform proper lifting techniques to prevent back injuries. A proper lifting technique includes the following steps:

- Position yourself parallel to the pig you are lifting.
- Secure your grip on the outside leg with the hand you are using to lift, and use the second hand on the other leg if the pig is heavy.
- Use the front legs of the pig to help support some of the weight until the pig is in a vertical position. Then lift the pig straight up to clear any gates.
- Lift the pig with your legs and arms, NOT with your back.

## In the Finisher

Pigs leaving the finisher will average about 260 pounds. The process of loading and unloading them can result in human and animal injury if appropriate techniques are not used. Workers need to realize the strength and agility pigs possess. It's a very bad idea for a worker to challenge a pig when it is trying to get past them. Workers should not attempt to move or stop an animal with their knees.

Workers should use a sorting board to move and direct the pigs. All workers should be aware of the location of their co-workers, and work together to move the animals. There are several kinds of sorting devices; see PQA for a description of sorting tools. To use a sorting panel properly, workers should:

- Keep the panel in front and away from their body, especially their knees.
- Use the ground or floor to anchor the panel -- not their knee.

Loading and unloading trucks makes for a stressful time. Workers should remain calm, and only load small groups at one time. The more excited the pig becomes, the harder it will be to handle. To ensure safe and effective animal handling, workers should:

- Know how to properly use sorting panels and other sorting devices,
- Be sure to use them whenever they move pigs, and
- Resist the urge to move too many pigs at one time.

## FAQs

Q. Why do pigs balk at entering dark or unfamiliar areas?

A. Pigs have a natural tendency to move from dimly lit areas to more brightly lit areas. This tendency can be used to make moving pigs easier and less stressful for both the animals and the handlers. For example, placing a spotlight on loading ramps can often facilitate entry of the pigs. Pigs also tend to balk at unfamiliar objects, such as a drain grates or hoses. You can avoid this by eliminating unfamiliar objects from the view of the pigs.

Q. How can I be exposed to zoonotic diseases?

A. Workers are exposed to zoonotic agents most commonly by contact with infected animals or their waste products. Worker with open cuts or scratches are more susceptible to infection with some type of zoonoses. If contact occurs, workers should first wash the affected area with soap and water. Then, contact your supervisor.

Q. How can I protect myself from zoonotic diseases?

A. Since many zoonoses are spread by contact, the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves and goggles can be very effective in protecting you from disease. Talk to your employer about the types of PPE available in your facility.

## LINKS

Pig Handling and Transport Considerations

<http://www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/livestock/pork/swine/bab10s06.html>

PQA Plus

<http://www.pork.org/Producers/PQA/PQAPlus.aspx>

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