Vet's Questions & Answers

Got a problem with your pigs and need some expert, practical advice? Well, let us know and our resident vet, Bob Stevenson, will be happy to help

Bad drinking habit

Do you expect me to drink that?

Q I discovered a dead pig this morning, and wondered whether I need to perhaps give something to the 17 remaining in the group of young growers to prevent any more from dying?

All in the group have been unwell for about three weeks, and I've noticed some of them walking stiffly and not being inclined to eat. Then, following a course of antibiotic, plus an anti-inflammatory, recovery appeared spectacular and everything seemed fine until today's sudden.

Ian, Mamhilad, Wales

A As this farm happened to be relatively nearby, I arranged to conduct a *post mortem* examination and discovered classical features of a pig condition well known as Glasser's disease. This is caused by a bacteria called *Haemophilus parasuis*, which has a predeliction for the smooth membranes lining joints, the chest plus the abdominal and heart 'sac'.

Everything started to fit together, with the group having been unwell and walking stiffly some weeks earlier. Stiffness is one of the typical signs when the bacteria attacks the synovial membranes in the limb joints. But why did this individual, that had apparently recovered, suddenly relapse and die?

While viewing the group, I suggested that the pigs were not obtaining enough suitable drinking water having, as they did, to wade, chest-deep, through their wallow to obtain water from their drinker. They weren't inclined to slake their thirst by drinking from the wallow fluid, and who can blame them?

Glasser's often needs one or more of a number of known stressors to kick start the disease process. I concluded that the pig that had died – and was found to have pleurisy at autopsy – simply wasn't able to cope with the poor provision of drinking water during a hot spell of weather; this was the final stress on this vulnerable animal. Glasser's can also be diagnosed in older pigs in high health herds, where vaccination can be used as part of a preventive plan.

Footprint or what?

Q I noticed a sow kept outdoors with a large patch on her side, and another sow with a darker, large patch also. What is the cause and is there a treatment that's needed?

Mark, North Gwent.

A I'm glad to get a chance to answer this one because it allows me to eliminate the majority of other skin diseases. The appearance of the large patch on the side, and a somewhat smaller one on the sow's back, is not characteristic of the 'diamonds' of the skin form of erysipelas. The condition known as *pityriasis rosea* occurs in younger pigs, and the outlines of the patches are different.

The adult form of greasy pig disease and Sarcoptic mange produce very different lesions. So what are the remaining likely causes? In fact, there's only one other thing that it could be, and that's a fungal infection. This condition, one type of ringworm, is quite often observed in outdoor sows. I think, in most veterinarians' view, there's a connection with straw and vermin!

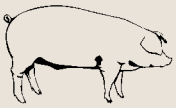
Fortunately, this condition seems to result in only minor or even no adverse effects on pig health. Irritation, with resulting scratching and rubbing – a feature of other skin conditions, especially Sarcoptic mange – is not present with this type of ringworm. The size of the patches can vary from very small areas, through 'footprint'-sized patches, to a size where one 'ring' might cover the whole of the side of a large sow!

Actual medical treatment is not usually required because natural resolution takes place in nine weeks or so. There are no authorised (licensed) treatments available. However, if cases are occurring as a regular feature, then a veterinary surgeon might need to prescribe an antifungal treatment under the prescribing 'cascade'. This would be necessary if sows, gilts or boars from a herd that has regular cases, are sent to shows or pedigree sales etc.

The spread of such a disease to other pigs at shows or via the sale ring must be prevented. As with ringworm in other species including cattle, horses or cats, this disease is zoonotic. This means that there's the potential, no matter how remote, for humans to catch ringworm from infected pigs. Hand-washing and other hygiene practices should be the 'order of the day'.

Discoloured patches like this are symptomatic of the fungal infections associated with ringworm.

Got a question?



If you're experiencing a problem with your pigs, or want some expert advice about specific health or welfare-related issues affecting your stock, then get in touch and we'll do our best to help. You can write to: *Practical Pigs* Magazine, Kelsey Publishing Group Ltd, Cudham Tithe Barn, Berry's Hill, Cudham, Kent TN16 3AG or, more immediately, send an email to: **Bob@trebasket.co.uk**

Too much sun?

Q *I have a group of 10 pigs which I keep in straw-based yards with an indoor kennel and outside runs. One morning, when I went to feed them, they were squealing and walking very stiffly towards their feed troughs when I arrived. Two out of a group of 10 were struggling to get to a standing position. What could be wrong? I noticed that certain individuals had very red skins, and black areas behind their ears.*

Tom, via email

A The photograph Tom supplied reveals severe scabbing of the back of the pig's ears; typical of sunburn. I'm always somewhat surprised how very quickly pigs do show pinking of the skin which, especially behind the ears of flop-eared, white breeds or crossbred pigs, burns to the extent of oozing serum which then coagulates as obvious scabs. If the pigs have the opportunity for a deep wallow, then the scabs may not be immediately obvious because of an over-layer of mud.

The pig in the photo is clearly very sunburned at the back of the ears. Less obvious scabbing may be present elsewhere along the back, sides or udder area. If we can suggest any parallel between pig skin and that of humans, then pigs that have the degree of sunburn illustrated will experience pain.

Pigs with sunburn of the back will not stand for the boar during mating. I have seen individuals, or small numbers in a group, show reluctance to feed and to squeal when the skin of the back is rubbed. With severe sunburn, absorption of early embryos can occur in gilts or sows, with consequent unexpected delayed returns to oetrus.

The most severe pig sunburn that I've ever encountered was in a group which were receiving raw potatoes as part of their diet. These potatoes contained considerable numbers that were green and with some shoots. I'm convinced that these green potatoes, and the effect they had on the liver metabolism, ensured that what might otherwise have been moderate sunburn, became extremely severe and very painful instead.

The pigs resented being made to move, and individuals had such clearly painful backs that they could not rise. I assume you're not feeding green potatoes to your pigs, Tom? Recovery was aided by treatment with a veterinary-prescribed corticosteroid, combined with good nursing.

Preventing sunburn and its consequences relies on owner awareness. As the season changes from winter to spring, good wallow preparation and management is needed. Usually May is the preparation month, but this year we've needed really good, deep wallows in April. Many individuals will seek shade or their huts, but some seem to relish the sun, and then suffer the consequences! Perhaps there's another human parallel here…

Finally, never forget that the many pigmented breeds have white portions (saddles or face stripes etc) which can be vulnerable. Also, very stress-susceptible pigs may react with an increase in core body temperature to a level which can result in heart failure and death.

Sunburn can be a very unpleasant and painful experience for pigs leading, in the worst cases, to heart failure and death.

Got the hump?

Q I've noticed two weaners from a litter of mine that have developed deformed backs, and I wonder whether they will eventually be fit for human consumption? I have enclosed a picture; what do you think?

Barry, Lancs.

A The photograph submitted illustrates a pig with a noticeable abnormality of its back. The initial thought is often that the individual has sustained some form of physical damage to the back, which has resulted in the abnormal shape. This is possible in an individual. In fact, I observed a pig just last month that had a back with a dip behind the shoulders and a hump somewhat further back. A large broad scar was a conspicuous feature. The farmer knew that the individual had suffered trauma soon after it was born.

However, in situations where more than one individual is affected, a common factor needs to be considered. In groups of weaned pigs kept in housing such as kennels or bungalows – where pigs emerge from the kennel and 'dip' under a flap – multiple cases may occur. In other situations, a genetic predisposition may be a major factor.

I became aware (a couple of decades ago) that certain groups of pigs developed this type of deformity at between eight and 16 weeks of age. The official description of the condition is kyphosis and lordosis (dipped shoulder/hump back). An additional common factor for consideration might be the feed. A recent report in the *Pig Journal* linked the appearance of the condition in some 5% of pigs aged between six and eight weeks, with the nutrition of the pregnant sow. Re-formulation of calcium, phosphorus and vitamin A and D3 levels in the diet was implemented to the dry sow ration, and this resulted in no further cases in the subsequent farrowed litters.

With respect to the question about food safety, I should point out that there's no danger to any consumer. Each pig must be assessed as to its suitability to be transported to the abattoir, and a food chain information sheet needs to be completed. The pig will be subjected to normal meat inspection at the abattoir, and some trimming may be required of the back area.

It's highly likely that readers may observe just an individual case. In these instances, physical damage needs to be considered. Certain of the most disfigured pigs may be lame or become paralysed. However, if multiple cases arise then genetics and/or nutritional factors must be examined. The need for adequate 'pop hole' size, and sufficient height of kennels, are both important factors.

A badly deformed back; much depends on whether it's an individual case, or one of many.

A possible case of post-weaning, multi-systemic wasting syndrome (PMWS).

A real waster!

Q I have noticed that my young pigs aren't growing very well and looking 'hairy'. I've heard that there is a wasting disease in pigs. Could this be responsible for producing the sort of sub-standard growth rate I'm seeing?

Sally, Northants.

A The photograph from Sally shows just the head of a poor pig. The coarse, hairy appearance and hint of a yellow discoloration (jaundice), is a concern if these are common or even very occasional features in regular groups of poor-performing pigs.

There are a variety of pig diseases that can result in the sort of poor performance Sally's seeing. I'm guessing that by 'wasting' disease, she's referring to one of the manifestations of a disease associated with infection with Porcine Circovirus Type2 (PCV2). The letters PMWS more accurately describe this complex condition and stand for: Post-weaning Multi-systemic Wasting Syndrome.

The virus damages the lymphoid follicles and the general resistance of the pig. The result on many farms is the regular appearance of pigs that don't perform as required or anticipated. Pigs develop enlarged lymph glands and damaged kidneys. Veterinary laboratory examination of such lymph glands and kidney tissue can be used for diagnosis in pigs that die, or need to be humanely euthanased.

There's no treatment for affected pigs, but the better news is that there are very effective vaccines. Herds of pigs that have been vaccinated have showed impressive results worldwide. I would suggest you obtain an accurate diagnosis from your veterinarian. Other disease such as ileitis and colitis and the complex of respiratory conditions, can produce wasting. The yellowing in certain cases, however, is something of a feature with PMWS.