

# 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

## *The trouble with showing*

**Q** Three weeks ago I took my pigs to a large, regional agricultural show and was pleased with the results they gained. My pleasure rapidly disappeared though when, after three weeks, two of my show pigs developed a deep cough, and became very unwell. Their temperatures were recorded at 41-42°C and my vet had to visit and provide treatment. This is the only show I've been to this year, and the experience has put me off showing in future.

If I want to show pigs next year, is there something that I can do to avoid something similar?

JD, Darwen, Lancs.

**A** Your question is so relevant at this time of year, especially since I've been asked similar questions on more occasions in 2011 than ever before! The likelihood is that your pigs encountered some form of new infection at the show. The length of time that your pigs took before starting to show signs of illness corresponds to the incubation period that applies to several of the known respiratory pig diseases.

These are the infections that are

most often associated with coughing as a main presenting sign. Most can be treated successfully with appropriate veterinary medicines, but it's worth noting that, in the meantime, the infection could easily have spread (by coughing and sneezing) to other pigs on your farm, and the consequences can be really serious.

There are certain important measures that you can take to limit the possibility of your pigs catching disease at pig gatherings of any sort. Some of these can also reduce the chance of the infection spreading on your return home. The use of an approved isolation facility is the most important of the several options. In my view, every pig keeper that has boars or sows/gilts visiting for breeding purposes, or has pigs arriving back from shows, sales or breeding, should apply for approval of an isolation area to your local Animal Health department, (now renamed AHVLA, following the joining of animal health and the veterinary laboratories).

A free visit and inspection will follow, usually carried out by your own vet. An approved isolation must fulfill certain criteria, and can be a separate airspace inside, or a paddock outside. One of the most important features for any isolation

facility, apart from a good bio-secure perimeter, is an impervious (concrete) pad to drop the tailboard of your trailer on to. The purpose of this is to ensure that the immediate area of tailboard contact – the high-risk area for disease ingress – can be appropriately and easily disinfected.

Obtaining approval should be reasonably straightforward; the skill in keeping infectious disease from entering your pigs in the remainder of your farm depends, crucially, on how you operate your isolation facility. An isolation area is so essential in many ways. For example, to mitigate the effects of the 20-day standstill during the show season, and also remove the need for the six-day standstill if you also need to move sheep, cattle or goats off shortly after pigs have returned from an event etc.

By obtaining approval for an isolation area, you'll be able to fine-tune procedures in that area, which should ease your anxiety concerning future show seasons. The use of certain medicines either before the show or after return, can also assist, but you need to discuss with your vet which are most suitable for your particular pig set-up, and how and when to administer them.



A simple isolation facility, complete with essential and easily cleanable concrete pad.

## 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](mailto:Bob@trebasket.co.uk)



### *Do piglets need iron?*

**Q** During a recent conversation with some pig-keeping friends, we touched on the administering of iron to piglets. It would seem that some inject iron into young piglets, others give it by mouth as a paste, and a third group simply place sods of turf in with the mother and her litter.

I've not carried out any of these procedures so far, but would be very interested in your thoughts and advice concerning the need to give iron to piglets?

**A** As with other mammals, in pigs a deficiency of iron can result in anaemia in young piglets. Iron is absolutely essential for the formation

of the oxygen-carrying haemoglobin, contained within red blood cells. Iron deficiency anaemia, as the condition is known, results in weak pigs that grow poorly and are susceptible to disease.

In our white breeds, the condition can be recognised by a pale, often yellow-tinged, colour to the skin and membranes that becomes visible once they reach 10-14 days old. A pasty white-to-yellow diarrhoea is known to be associated with anaemia, and this appears at around three weeks of age.

Piglets are born with a limited store of iron, and so need a daily supply from their mother's milk, which is notoriously deficient. In the outdoor situation, piglets may obtain sufficient from taking in soil, assuming it's iron-rich. Oral paste preparations have been used in the

past, although with variable degrees success in preventing anaemia. Also, as you mentioned, many keepers of small numbers of pigs introduce sods of earth inside farrowing pens.

However, the 'cast iron' method used to prevent iron deficiency anaemia is by injection of 1ml of an iron preparation containing 200mg of iron. Recently I've been surprised to diagnose obvious anaemia in two traditional, outdoor pig enterprises. In both cases, the diagnosis was initially suspected in progeny from Berkshire, Gloucester Old Spots and, more recently, in so-called Iron Age piglets. In each situation, piglets performed poorly. The diagnosis of iron deficiency anaemia was confirmed by blood sample analysis and post mortem examination of individuals that died.



An iron injection can make all the difference to a young piglet's overall health and development prospects.



## Lousy pigs!

**Q** I'm having some trouble with lice on a few pigs. I don't know whether the eggs and lice are connected, but I'm sending a photo of eggs attached to hair and a 'bug' that I managed to catch. Louse powder has no effect. Can you help with some advice about what I should do?

AF, Canterbury, Kent



Pig lice eggs clearly visible here lining the hairs near the base of the tail.



Measuring 3-4mm long, an adult louse should be pretty easy to spot.

**A** The photographs illustrate really good examples of two of the life-cycle stages of the pig louse, *Haematopinus suis*. The adult lice are easily seen with the naked eye. The lines of eggs shown in the photograph are around the tail head region of an adult pig, but these pests are also commonly found inside the ear flaps, around the neck region and between the legs.

Lice will move from one pig to another, mostly by contact, and can infest all ages of pig. There's only one type of louse infestation in pigs, and it's known as a sucking louse, rather than a biting type. The one shown here provides a good example of an adult louse; a flattened, grey-coloured parasite that's 3-4mm long. As the description 'sucking' implies these insects penetrate the pig's skin with their mouthparts, and suck blood. The females lay a few eggs each day and these are

attached to the hair with a cement-like substance. After about two weeks, the eggs hatch into young adults (nymphs), and mature to complete the life cycle; adult-to-adult in just 30 days.

Many larger pig farms will have measures designed to control mange, and effective control of this problem will also eliminate lice. While lice are easily visible, the mites that cause mange are microscopic. Although invisible, mange mite infestation is the more significant parasite. Intense irritation is the characteristic sign that a pig has mange. Pigs with lice are less likely to be greatly itchy and rub less against their surroundings or scratch with their hind legs. Lice infestation is a more frequent condition on smaller pig farms. The

smaller pigs with a heavy infestation may loose enough blood to produce anaemia. Introduction of virus diseases into pigs via the blood-sucking lice has been suspected.

Unfortunately, treatment of lice isn't as straightforward in pigs as in some other species. The only treatments that have been proven to be effective are certain of the macrocyclic lactones that contain Ivermectin or Doramectin. These are administered by injection, although a special formulation containing Ivermectin can be incorporated into pig feed. If injecting presents a problem, then speak to your vet who will consider prescribing a spot-on preparation under what's known as the prescribing 'cascade'. Only your veterinarian is permitted to prescribe under this system.

## Curse of the mummy

**Q** I've been keeping pigs for two years but recently found small, dead, black piglets at farrowing. I've not seen this before. In fact, three out of five gilts have presented small numbers at farrowing, producing a few live pigs each and several black and shrivelled individuals of different sizes. Is this a result of in-breeding?

MG, Telford, Shrops.

**A** I've included a photo here to illustrate what I'm assuming is typical of what you describe. The black piglets are known as 'mummified' pigs. The term implies that the piglet is covered in a shriveled, hard, desiccated and discoloured skin membrane. The skin is tightly applied to the bony skeleton, and all the soft parts of the piglet are absent. The cause of mummification can be due to several infections plus some other occasional factors.

The most likely cause of mummification in this instance is that of an infection by a specific virus known as *porcine parvovirus* (PPV). This infection is worldwide and is present on almost all pig farms of any size, small or large. Protection against the damaging effects of this virus occurs naturally, as the pigs' immunity responds to the challenge of the virus which is contained in pig faeces.

However, immunity isn't necessarily established before gilts are pregnant and, the younger the gilt is mated the less likely that natural immunity will protect the pregnancy. Can immunity be encouraged to develop in such instances? Well, yes it can! Administration of one dose of parvovirus vaccination at least three weeks before mating will prevent the adverse effects of the infection, including mummification. The virus doesn't produce signs of illness, and only shows problems when the

virus crosses the placenta in a non-immune pregnant sow or, more likely, pregnant gilt.

I encounter situations on a regular basis that involve this virus, and usually the reports indicate that a number of gilts have produced very small numbers of pigs with several mummified individuals in each litter. Vaccination of maiden gilts is generally recommended by vets, and the vaccine is available in a form that includes a component designed to protect against erysipelas.



Not a pretty sight, but 'mummified' piglets are a more common occurrence that you might imagine

## Unsuitable for consumption?

**Q** I was informed by my local abattoir that four of a recent batch of six pigs that I took there had been classed as 'unsuitable for human consumption' and had been 'binned' as a result.

Further investigation with the abattoir revealed that the animals had been affected by 'milk spot', which I gather is some kind of worm. Please can you comment on this, and offer some advice about how I can prevent something similar happening in the future?

JB, Bideford, N Devon

**A** This is typical of the sort of question that I receive on a regular basis. Often the first awareness of any problem follows contact with the abattoir, as in this case.

The term 'milk spot' arises from the description of a pig's liver that shows small white areas on its surface. These areas are, in fact, caused by the presence

of white scar tissue resulting from damage caused by the migration of the larvae of the large round worm of pigs (*Ascaris suis*).

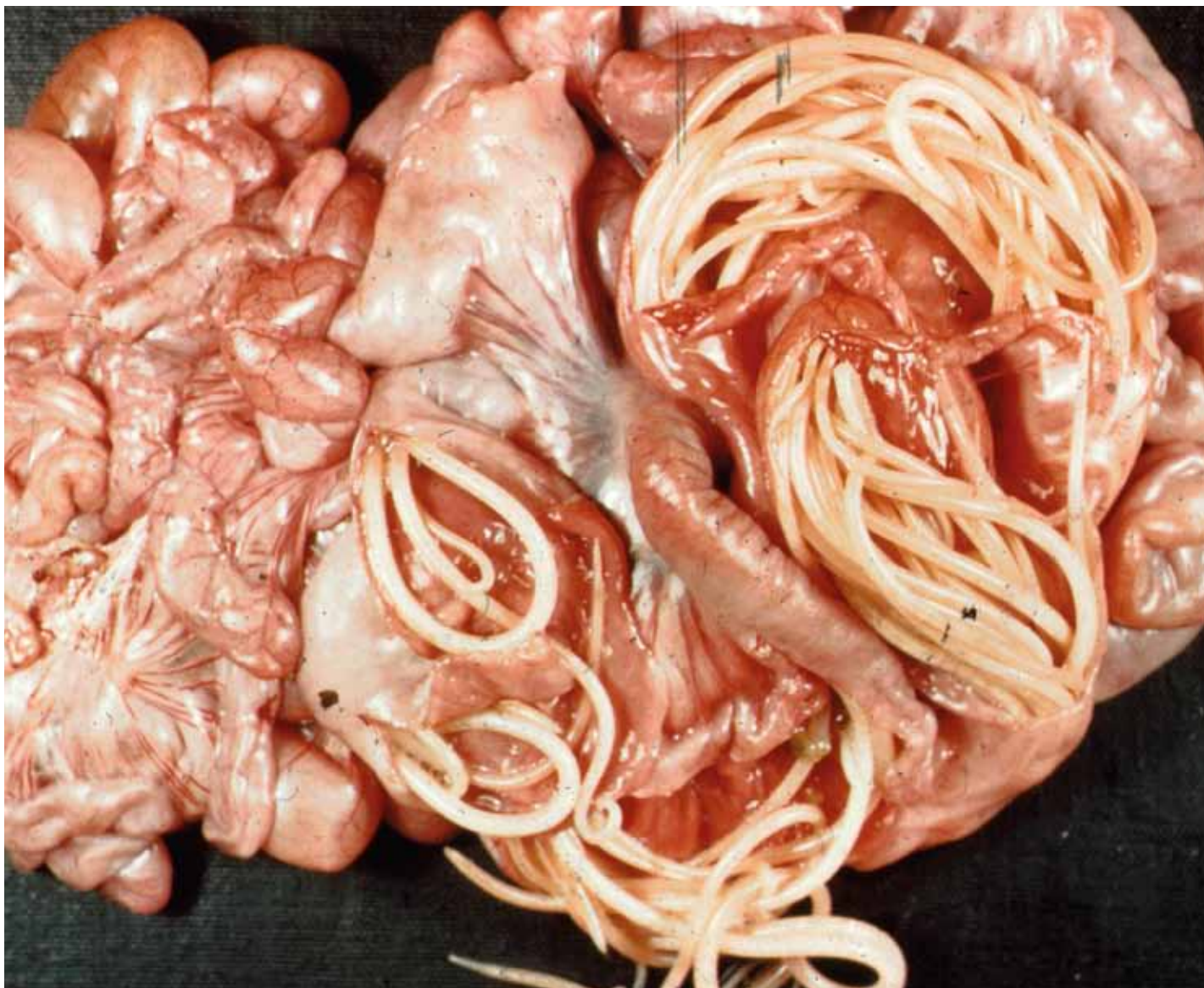
The adult worms actually reside in a pig's intestine, and produce vast numbers of resilient eggs which are sticky and very resistant to both physical cleaning and powerful disinfectants. Suckling piglets can become infested by taking in worm eggs which are stuck to the skin of the udder. The worms themselves tend to slow the growth of pigs and, in some cases, the pigs also show a 'pot belly', scruffy appearance and a husky cough.

It's understandable and, indeed inevitable, that on grass paddocks which are in regular use for producing and rearing pigs, increasing numbers of ascaris eggs contaminate the area. Such paddocks can actually become 'pig sick', and all pigs on these areas will be exposed to variable levels of eggs. The ascaris eggs are easily recognised under the microscope after preparing fresh faeces. Such a procedure can assist

in enabling you to plan an appropriate worming programme.

Most anthelmintic medicines (wormers) which are approved for use in pigs, will kill the adults which can then appear as spaghetti-like strands of up to 9in long in the droppings after worming. Wormers that are effective can be added to pig feed, drinking water or, alternatively, injected. Discuss your own use of wormer with your veterinarian or your merchant SQP. Often to be sure, pigs should be wormed at weaning and then at suitable intervals.

You must not forget the meat withdrawal period associated with the use of any wormer. The RUMA Guidelines to Pig Wormers are a really useful source of information, and are available either as a short version, or a longer, more technical one (visit [www.ruma.org.uk](http://www.ruma.org.uk)). Finally, adult pigs are a source of contamination of the environment, and they might well require worm control once or twice in a 12-month period.



Large adult ascarid worms found to be blocking a pig's intestines.