

## Stiff joints

**Q** I keep growing pigs to finish at 75kg. They grow very satisfactorily but I've noticed that, at an early stage, some of the animals become stiff with swollen joints. These swellings seem to be around the hock joints or shoulders. What's the cause of this, and how can I prevent it happening in the future?

James, Shropshire

**A** The photograph of the pig supplied certainly illustrates the situation well. The pig has an obvious enlargement of the right hock area, and I've little doubt that it has arthritis of this joint. If this was just one pig then an alternative consideration might be that the pig had traumatized the leg in some way. Cases where pigs trap a leg, or have one stepped on by a pen mate are relatively common. But, the fact that you're noticing this occurring regularly suggests to me that it's more likely to be due to an infectious arthritis.

Arthritis is an inflammation of one or more joints, and it's the larger joints in the limbs that are most frequently involved. Obviously, a damaged joint – for whatever reason – is a painful thing and this, combined with the inability of the limb to bend normally, produces the lameness that you've been observing.

The actual swelling is due to attempts by the body to repair the damage. Increased blood circulation to the area helps to ensure that healing elements are present. As a consequence, the joint becomes hot and sometimes pink in colour (this sort of colour change will obviously be more conspicuous in the white breeds). In addition, more fluid – synovial fluid – is produced into the joint spaces, which bulge as a result.

Since you seem to have spotted individuals with this arthritis on a regular basis, I would suggest that a positive diagnosis is made by your vet. Both the treatment and prevention strategies will vary according to the cause. Such cases are most likely to be triggered by the presence in the pig's body of bacteria such as streptococcus, haemophilus (Glasser's disease) and mycoplasma. All three are known to have something of a predilection for joints.

One of the obvious signs of erysipelas is lameness. Indeed, the type of arthritis produced by the erysipelas bacteria can be differentiated by viewing the inside of affected joints. A red plaque tends to be produced which spreads over the cartilage surfaces of the affected joints. However, this is only normally spotted during a post-mortem examination, although it can also become apparent at the slaughter house.



Notice how the right hock area is enlarged; an indicator of arthritis in the joint.

As with so many diseases in pigs, the correct method of treatment needs to be started at the earliest possible stage to give the animal the best chance of a full recovery. Fortunately, there are some very satisfactory treatments available for the bacteria that I've mentioned, although they are prescription-only products and so will need to be carefully selected by a vet.

Later in the course of the disease, the bacteria may well be killed, but damage is already likely to have occurred and, unfortunately, affected joint surfaces don't generally repair fully. Diagnosis can be made by particular laboratory tests on blood and joint fluid or tissue. Once this has been done, a programme of vaccination – or very strategic medication – should prevent further cases.

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