

# 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



Pigs and other livestock: how far apart should they be?

## Disease from chickens?

**Q** I have a few chickens and ducks which have contact with my Gloucestershire Old Spots pigs. Recently, a friend told me that pigs can catch diseases from chickens, and explained that coccidiosis can spread to the pigs. Is this actually true, and are there other conditions that I ought to be aware and/or concerned about?

**GA, South Wales**

**A** When small groups of animals and birds run together outside, as has been the case for centuries, then there should be little to concern you. Clearly though, if individuals or more than one chicken demonstrates signs of being unwell, then your question is certainly a relevant one to ask.

Of course, it's impossible for me to say whether or not you have ill chickens! However, in general terms, the answer relating to coccidiosis is clear. While a form of coccidiosis does occur in suckling piglets, the parasite that preys on pigs is totally different from that found in chicken.

The second part of your question brings other aspects into consideration. As a vet, I have encountered situations where flu viruses have been considered to pass from poultry to pigs, and might even

involve the pig stockperson. But these occurrences are uncommon, and only usually occur in the UK on holdings that have a fairly large number of poultry kept close to pigs.

In East Asia there have been instances of damaging strains of flu making the leap from poultry to people, but this is typically driven by the fact that the owners are living 'cheek by jowl' with their stock.

It's well known that vermin spread disease to other species. Infestation with both rats and mice is far from unusual on many pig farms. A vermin control programme assists in preventing disease in pigs associated with such bacteria as *Leptospira* and possibly *Salmonella*. However, domestic keepers must remain ever vigilant about the rodent-attracting properties of spilled feed and piles of rubbish! Even the best farms need a bit of a clean-up from time to time.

Another aspect relating to the transmission of 'bugs' between different animal species that's forced itself on to the agenda in recent years, concerns bovine tuberculosis. As you may know,

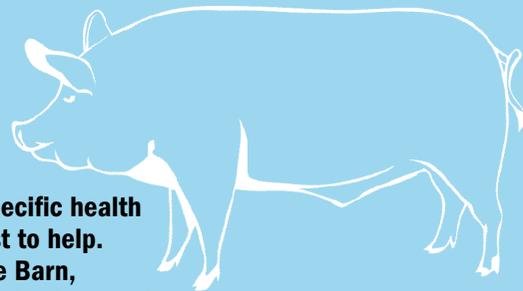
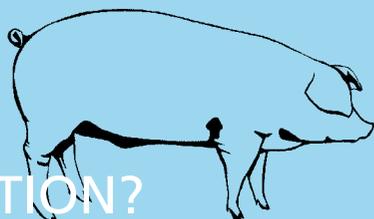
many cattle farmers have to be conscious of the **biosecurity** of their farm buildings and fields.

The word 'biosecurity' seeks to address the measures in place to prevent infections entering any type of farm and spreading into the animals. Actual nose-to-nose contact with neighbouring animals (over a single fence, for example) poses a considerable risk. We don't know which disease organisms they may be harbouring!

In fact, very occasionally, the bacteria that causes bovine Tb has been found to have entered pigs. To avoid this happening to pigs, a somewhat arbitrary distance of three metres is suggested as suitable to prevent direct transmission. The sort of set-up illustrated in the photo above would be very adequate.

Having said all that, though, it's important to bear in mind that actual instances of this sort of problem are actually pretty rare. So let's all work hard to keep things that way, and dwell on the thought that, in terms of disease spread, a newly-purchased pig is the residential pig's worst enemy!

## ▶ 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)

# Reluctant wood clearance

**Q** I'm looking after one of my neighbour's young Saddleback pigs. The animal is assisting several others in clearing a wood. However, I'm concerned now because he's just become reluctant to leave the railway wagon, and appears to me to be generally uncomfortable.

I've also noticed that he's grinding his teeth and, more worrying still, he's stopped eating and drinking. Is there something I can give him, or should I simply call my vet?

**RB, Powys**

**A** After discussing this situation with the keeper, it became clear that the pig had probably been off-colour for somewhat longer than first thought. My advice was to seek further advice and attention from his veterinarian.

My thoughts immediately turned to a number of similar questions that I'd been asked over the past six months. Although pigs are well known for being excellent at clearing rough ground or undergrowth in established woods, there are occasions when this won't be so successful. Sometimes the pigs involved are just too small to be able to cope.

When this is the case, they'll often simply eat too great an amount of fibrous material. When combined with a fair amount of soil and leaves, this can result in a mixture that has a real chance of blocking the digestive system.

Twice in the past three months, I've come across pigs weighing between 12 and 40kg that have been introduced to very unsuitable situations. What's more, I know of six growing pigs (on different pig holdings), that have died from what ends up as caecal and colon impaction. Others have only responded slowly to treatment.

Pigs may be superb omnivores with a reputation of being able to eat 'anything', but it's very important to realise that there is a limit! When this is reached will depend on the both the size and weight of pig plus the type and amount of the material to be cleared.

Pigs do have the ability to make great use of very different feed materials, and their capacity to do just that has enabled some pig keepers to remain in business. I do believe that, in the present period of very expensive pig feed, it's increasingly important to make the best use of alternative feeds.

If you have access to surplus fruit or vegetables, or perhaps by-products from the milk processing industry, then lucky you! However, you shouldn't need reminding that in any search for alternative feed for your pigs, it's illegal to use household scraps or catering waste. The consequences of doing so are simply too awful to contemplate!

Anyway, back to the pigs with impacted digestive systems. Animals suffering in this way will become increasingly lethargic and constipated and, to make the situation worse, they'll stop drinking and kidney function will decline. Those individuals that died and that I was able to autopsy, contained material that had set like concrete; there was no possible cure for them.

In situations like this you must check the health of your pigs twice a day. If you

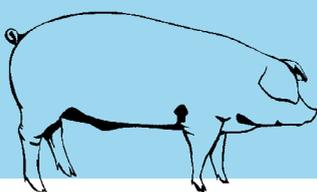
suspect that animals weighing up to about 40kg are impacted (with large abdomens and signs of pain), they must be encouraged to drink, be offered sloppy feed and removed from the 'clearing environment'.

A useful tip when hydrating is to use a soft, squash bottle as a drenching vessel, or a very slow-running hose to the mouth. Pigs will often take fluid this way while refusing voluntary drinking from a trough. Also, hydration per rectum can be a life-saver; and it's so easy to do. Chat to your vet about this for some helpful, practical advice.

Laxatives can be effective (for example, liquid paraffin or linseed oil) and the discomfort needs to be controlled with a suitable analgesic authorised for use in pigs. There are now three or four such effective medicines available.



How big is too small for ground-clearance duties?



They may be outside, but what about comfort and shelter?

## Outdoor requirements

**Q** What are the requirements for pigs to be kept out of doors? I have always wanted a few pigs rooting about in a paddock. I'm about to fulfill my dream and buy two sows from a local farmer, so some basic information about this before I start would be a great help.

LH, Cornwall

**A** In general terms, the actual requirements for pigs that are kept outside in paddocks are the same as those for pigs kept inside on concrete. At first glance, this might seem a strange thing to say, but bear with me.

There's a set of 'rules' for all keepers of animals that relate to the needs or provisions that are deemed essential to address both the health and welfare of various animal species. These requirements have been included in a *Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Livestock*.

There's a particular *Code for Pigs* and all pig keepers and their workers must become familiar with the details of this document, which is available from Defra.

The code, which has stood the test of time, was last published in 2003, and offers useful explanations about how to address the needs of pigs kept either inside or out. It's a very readable document that was produced by people who were both practical and knowledgeable about pigs and their specific needs.

In very general terms, each species' code lists the so-called five freedoms. These require some interpretation but are as follows: freedom from hunger and thirst; freedom from discomfort; freedom from pain, injury or disease; freedom to express most normal behaviour and freedom from fear and distress.

In this instance, though, perhaps I could choose just one of the freedoms for particular mention here, and leave the rest for consideration on another occasion. One area that's quite often inadequately considered by eager, first-time pig keepers, is that of comfort and shelter.

In parts of the UK where there's high annual rainfall – especially if this is combined with heavy ground – even a few pigs will produce a rooted-up area resembling a ploughed field in next to no time.

Merely keeping pigs outside doesn't automatically mean that health and welfare is somehow catered for. All too often I see situations that are unacceptable in my view. The photograph included above appears to illustrate a situation where scant regard has been given to either comfort or shelter.

A hoop of corrugated iron with a roughed-up earth floor is unlikely to provide comfort, and only minimal shelter. The method of provision of feed is also crude, to say the least. The floor in any hut should be dry and comfortable to lie on. In some circumstances this means the use of some form of bedding.

So my advice would be to obtain the code from Defra, thoroughly read it and then act accordingly before acquiring those sows!

## Sudden lameness

**Q** I have a Gloucestershire Old Spots gilt that's become suddenly lame. She is easy to handle and I can't see any obvious swellings or cuts. What's more she shows no reaction or discomfort when her leg is handled. Is it likely to get better on its own, or should she receive some sort of treatment?

TD, South Wales

**A** This question is typical of many that I receive from readers. Pigs of differing age and size do present signs of sudden lameness from time to time. Out of the blue, so to speak, a growing pig or a sow – even a boar – will suddenly start showing this sort of problem.

When attempting to describe the severity or degree of lameness, it's useful to have some sort of practical yardstick against which to judge the condition, especially when discussing the situation on the telephone with the vet or other stockperson etc.

I use a score of one to 10, with one being only slightly lame and 10 being a swinging-leg lameness, of which more later! In the latter case, the pig has to hop forward, bearing no weight on the affected limb. An animal with this severity of condition will be really reluctant to move at all. Making a hands-on judgement about the cause will depend greatly on the pig's temperament, and the amount of handling that it's had in the past.



Foot-related problems are important with pigs; in this case some careful trimming cured the lameness

Severe lameness like this may follow major leg damage; even a broken bone. Pigs do break a leg more often than just occasionally, and seem to show no obvious pain. However, it seems fair to assume they are in considerable pain. In such instances, the

animal will be non weight-bearing on the damaged limb, and the leg will be swinging when the pig moves or is encouraged to move; hence the term swinging-leg lameness.

I do hope that readers never discover lameness of this type because the chance of both relieving pain in the medium term, as well as assisting in the repair process, are slim. However, even very severe cases may result from a penetrating foreign body, such as a nail or strong blackthorn piercing the soft bulb of the heel.

Fortunately, the vast majority of lameness is less severe and can be the result of riding activity associated with the oestrous cycle, or infections of the joints or feet. In the case of this gilt, I was able to obtain a useful photograph which revealed the likely cause. Study the image above and make a guess about what you think this foot is demonstrating?

The shape of the one claw is noticeably abnormal, with a spur of horn having grown across the space. There are various cracks appearing too, caused no doubt by the abnormal placing and weight-bearing influences. Some limited trimming of the spur of overgrown horn will restore the claw shape. This, together with suitable local antiseptic, should resolve much, if not all, of the lameness.

Any therapy using antibiotic injection depends on the amount of deeper infection found, and needs veterinary prescribing (perhaps via a plan already in place which should outline best treatment in such cases).



Fit for purpose?

## Uninterested mother

**Q** I have two sows, and the GOS x Welsh produced her first litter three days ago. Last night she seemed fine and ate her supper normally. However, this morning I've noticed that she seems reluctant to eat or drink, and appears uninterested in her litter of seven robust pigs. What needs to be done to help?

**CC, Salisbury**

**A** Having obtained a little more information about this case, I decided to make a visit myself, although I expect you're already wondering about the 'Fit for purpose?' caption used on the photograph here. Well, the sight of a multi-coloured assortment of busy piglets having been produced by a black sow, might offer a clue.

Upon peeping over the half-door of the stable, and viewing the sow with her sleeping litter, certain things were clear; there was no additional heat source, but the piglets looked content although the mother was certainly uninterested, despite the presence of a strange vet!

I discovered that a heat lamp was used, but only when there was somebody on the holding, due to the fire risk. However, as the stable interior had been made cosy with appropriate bedding material, and the

weather wasn't cold, I was happy with that. Also, the pigs were content and not shivering or piling.

I spotted uneaten nuts on the floor, and no new faeces since morning mucking out. What's more, the process of taking the rectal temperature of the dam using a digital thermometer was too easily accomplished! Similarly, feeling each and every milking gland was not resented, but quickly led me to my diagnosis; a case of old-fashioned farrowing fever (albeit with little sign of the fever, but plenty of other typical signs).

Once encouraged to stand, and tempted with a crushed apple to assess the degree of interest in feed, I palpated the specific points for body condition scoring, and awarded three. No problem there. However, the most telling sign was a uniformly tense udder; with fluid under the skin covering all of the glands, and blotchy pink patterns over the skin of the udder.

Questions about the amount of feed being eaten before the birth of the seven live and one dead piglets, revealed that an excessive amount had been offered and

eaten. It's important that feed is reduced on the day before farrowing, and only offered on the day if 'requested' by the dam.

So-called udder oedema follows, with effects on milk let down. Constipation tends to be associated with farrowing fever too and, if the sow had been in really too fit condition, the piglets would have been squealing with hunger.

Treatment with an anti-inflammatory injection and oxytocin to aid relief of udder tension and the release of milk, solved this case. This treatment, combined with a laxative fluid diet for a day, also relieved the constipation and all was on track again within 24hrs.

But this successful outcome was entirely due to the early detection by the keepers. This young sow was not quite prepared properly for farrowing and not quite 'fit for purpose'. 'Fit not fat' is a frequently used expression as an aim for both farrowing and for best results at mating. A great way to ensure fitness is to learn how to physically score body condition at different stages of the cycle.

Can you and should you guess the body condition score of the black sow in the photograph?