

National Hog Farmer



5 commandments of starting wean pigs

Attention to individual pigs is important to the health of the overall herd.

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The first few weeks after the weaning period are critical in the pig's life to determine its ability to grow, gain weight and ultimately become profitable for your operation. Pigs with a higher average daily gain in the first week of life tend to be bigger at the

end of nursery and reach market weights faster. Focus on these 5 commandments of starting wean pigs to get your next group off to a good start.

1. Thou shall hydrate the pig

The piglet's body composition is made up of 70% water and water not only drives feed intake, it is also important for biological functions like immune function and temperature regulations. It is vital that piglets can easily find and access water as they enter their new environment. Be sure your water delivery system is along the gate line so pigs bump into it as they explore their pens. Set it up at a height that pigs can easily find it and fill cups and bowls with water until pigs learn how to hit the nipple themselves. Target 15 to 25 pigs per water space and consider removable water delivery systems designed for the first few weeks like nipple bars or troughs. Watch your water pressure and flow rate to be sure it is high enough that water flows easily (19 ounces per minute) but not too high to scare pigs away from the drinker. Several studies have documented that about half of piglets do not even take a drink of water in the first 24 hours. Electrolytes and plasma products can boost the hydration power of the water and/or fill their guts faster in those pigs that may be disadvantaged.

2. Thou shall fill the belly

The key to getting pigs eating right away is to remember what their first few weeks of life were like. The sow lets her milk down about once an hour and rolls over and grunts "or calls" the litter to eat. As we start pigs on solid feed in a new environment it is important to mimic what we can from their life on the sow. Easy access to feed is critical and setting up feeders to be slightly loose (typically 50% to 70% pan coverage depending on feeder design and feed composition) helps the pigs get a bite even if they get close to the feeder. Adjust the feeders daily as the setting often changes with the various nursery diets and as pigs learn to eat. Providing small amounts of feed (about 0.5 to 1 pound) on mats multiple times a day "calls the pigs" to eat just like the sow did and trains them to eat on their own. Highly palatable and digestible starter feeds ease the transition from milk to solid feed and appease the pig's senses

(taste and smell) to attract them to the new diet. Pigs have an extremely strong sense of taste and smell, so keep the feeders clean and free of spoiled or moldy feed.

3. Thou shall keep them warm and dry

Appropriate ventilation for wean pigs is a delicate balance of keeping them warm enough while keeping the environment dry. A critical component of getting the right temperature for each pig is providing zone heating through brooders or heat lamps over mats. Have enough mats (about 0.5 square feet per pig) to allow all pigs to lay on the mat comfortably to minimize drafts and cool air that comes up from the pits and position the tube heat, brooders or heat lamps to reach 85 to 90 degrees F in the center of the mat. This allows smaller pigs to lay toward the center to get the heat they need and large pigs to lay on the outside of the mats. Targeting 50% to 60% humidity ensures proper air exchange and removes build-up of gases, bacteria and viruses from the environment. Observe the laying pattern of pigs right away when you walk in the barn to determine if they are too cold (huddling) or too warm (laying away from the heat lamps/brooders) and where they are laying to identify potential drafts or problem areas.

4. Thou shall restart nutritionally challenged pigs

Just as you observe the environment every day, it is important to evaluate each pig individually every day to determine if it is getting all the nutrients it needs or is showing signs of disease. Most pigs I see in the first two weeks after weaning do not need a treatment to get them going, they simply need to be placed in an environment with less competition and appropriate access to feed. Nutritional fallouts are pigs that do not have gut fill and may be in poor body condition (visible spine, hip bones and ribs) and don't have any other obvious signs of disease. Pull these pigs to intensive care pens and provide gruel multiple times per day. Start with a gruel that is mostly water (70% water, 30% feed) to encourage water intake and transition to mostly feed over seven days. The goal is to get the pigs back on dry feed so be sure to focus on the transition. Just like mat feeding, do not feed too much at one time to ensure the feed does not spoil and to encourage pigs to find the feeder. These are to

be supplements to stimulate intake but can't be their sole source of nutrition for successful recovery.

5. Thou shall identify and treat sick pigs

Look for clinical signs of disease such as coughing, thumping, snotty noses, depression, diarrhea, inflamed rectum, lameness, swollen joints, head tilt and/or walking in circles. All of these indicate a virus or bacteria is causing disease and work with your veterinarian to determine the appropriate course of action. Keep track of how many pigs are showing these signs each day to determine if mass medication is warranted or if the disease can be managed individually. Early identification and treatment of disease is vital for success rate and minimizing chronic issues later in the nursery.

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