

Cannibalism in Pigs

Savaging of newborn piglets by their mothers can cause significant losses to some farms and may be a particular problem in the new herd. Whilst most commonly occurs in gilts, it is in no way confined to these animals, with sporadic cases occurring in sows and occasionally in animals that savage piglets in successive litters.

The damage normally will occur either during the farrowing process or within a few hours of its completion. On rare occasions, it may not occur until the second day of life. Uncontrolled, a sow or gilt that starts savaging may go on to destroy the whole litter or at least cause injury.

Causes

There can be little doubt that an individual behavioural abnormality may exist in some sows and certain breed types or lines are more likely to savage. Where a problem occurs in gilt litters, one must examine the circumstances leading up to the first farrowing.

Usually gilts will have been housed in a stable group, often with penmates that they have been in contact with for many months. Other than at service, the only physical human contact may be to inject them. They will then be moved to the farrowing crate, confined for the first time in their lives in a strange building often smelling of disinfectant. They may then be exposed to close human contact at feeding time, all of which builds up to a frightening time for them. With the onset of farrowing comes novel hormonal changes, increase in blood pressure and then, finally, the discomfort of the actual farrowing process. It is hardly surprising that they are upset.

Other factors that may be involved in the onset of savaging include:-

- 1) Certain feed materials. Although poorly defined in the pig, the nutritional influences that trigger hyperactivity in children may play a part in disturbing normal maternal behaviour.
- 2) Environmental factors. Excessive or deficient temperatures may upset gilts and sows at farrowing as can draughts, noise and even down to “stray” voltage providing a low grade electrical charge onto a crate or feed/water trough.
- 3) “Infectious” savaging. Some producers report that where a single animal is aggressive with her litter, this may have the effect of setting off other sows or gilts in the room, although in such circumstances any environmental trigger factors should be considered.
- 4) Feed levels. Low bulk feed levels in the few days leading up to farrowing may agitate sows.

Prevention

Clearly to prevent savaging, the aim of husbandry must be to have the gilts and sows as calm as possible at farrowing time. Attention to any obvious environmental insults is essential but the approach of the stockman must also be considered. A noisy agitated stockman may “set off” the pigs whereas a calm, peaceful methodical stockman will tend to put the pigs at ease.

With gilts, always ensure that they have plenty of time in the farrowing crate prior to farrowing to settle down – minimum 5 days. Where agitation is evident, bulk feed should be provided – chopped barley straw, bran etc – to provide better gut fill.

Some producers have successfully used rabbits in farrowing crate pens prior to farrowing to allow gilts to “get used to” having small creatures moving around close to their head. This may be particularly useful in gilt herds, carries a minimal risk of disease but it is not uncommon for the rabbits to be savaged!

Treatment

An agitated sow or gilt at farrowing must be recognised as a potential “savager”. The litter should be boxed away under a creep lamp until the farrowing process is complete and only released under supervision.

Use of tranquillisers (e.g. Azaperone: Stresnil: Janssen) will be the most common method of subduing a gilt or sow that is savaging, although it should be given before the animal becomes too agitated and at as low a dose as possible – often 2ml of Stresnil will be sufficient for a gilt. Heavy sedation of a farrowing animal can interfere with the farrowing process.

An alternative is to muzzle the sow using an improvised muzzle. A cut off wellington boot placed over the snout and tied behind the ears can be effective although in some individuals this will actually make them more agitated in their attempts to remove the implement.

Often a handful of food may be all that is required to distract a gilt or sow from savaging.

Obviously where a problem occurs, additional attention is needed to ensure colostrum intake for the piglets from a mother who may not be too willing to suckle.

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