

Leave a Few Open Pens

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Reducing mortality and morbidity is a challenge during the pig's post-weaning period. Of course, you want to avoid slow-growing pigs that fall behind and fail to reach the targeted final weight at the end of the nursery period.

The transition from the sow to the nursery phase is a tough one for the young pig as the food supply and environment change drastically. While many factors impact nursery performance, the most common reason why some pigs do not perform well during this period is that they do not start eating feed right after weaning. Typically, these pigs do not eat because they do not drink water. Therefore, they become dehydrated and the spiral begins. They do not eat, do not gain weight and often get sick.

Some of these pigs will eventually learn to drink and eat on their own, but left unassisted they will never catch up to the pigs that started drinking and eating right after weaning. By taking a few relatively easy steps, you can help these pigs recover and catch up with the rest of the group.

Water intake = feed intake

To avoid the scenario outlined above, it is necessary to make sure that all pigs start drinking as soon as they have entered the nursery room. There is not an effective way to monitor the water intake of each individual pig, but pigs that do not drink become dehydrated.

The signs of dehydration are easily recognizable within 4 to 5 days after weaning. These pigs are thinner than the rest of the group, they lack the look of a pig with a full stomach and are often seen licking fluids from the slats. Dehydrated pigs are often the pigs that will be sucking on the navels of other pigs.

Special care and water

The only way to make dehydrated pigs start eating is to make sure they start drinking. This can be accomplished if the effected pigs are moved to an empty pen as soon as you recognize that they are not drinking water. If these pigs are given special care in a new pen and you provide water in a trough, they will typically respond quickly and start drinking. The trough is manually filled with water and should be cleaned and refilled at least 2 times every day. The important thing is that the pigs always have easy access to clean water from a source different from the drinking nipple that they for whatever reason do not like to use.

Sometimes it may be necessary to add a bit of milk replacer to the water to entice the piglet to step up to the trough and begin to drink. As soon as these pigs have learned to drink, they will also start eating, and after a short time, they will get back on track and they soon learn to drink water from the water nipples. Therefore, the troughs are usually needed only during the initial 2 to 3 weeks.

The pigs in the pens containing the water troughs are fed the phase 1 diet until they have learned to drink and are eating well. They should not be switched to the phase

2 diet until they have reached the weight that the rest of the pigs in the barn had, when they were switched to this diet. That way the pigs that are moved are getting the same quantities of the phase 1 diet as the pigs that started eating right after weaning. Unless another issue surfaces, these pigs will reach the targeted weight at the same time as pigs that started eating right after weaning.

Empty pens are key

To successfully execute the strategy outlined here, and to avoid losing pigs that don't learn to drink, you will need to leave some pens open as you bring in a group of pigs into the nursery or to the wean-to-finish facility.

Of course, the number of pens that are needed varies from operation to operation, or even from one group of pigs to the next, but in most cases, it will be between 5 and 10% of the pigs that are slow to learn to drink and need to be moved. The important thing is that you make this space available and part of your management routine. The other important step is that all pigs are closely monitored during the immediate post-weaning period. Since dehydrated pigs usually show signs within 4 to 5 days after weaning, you should sort out effected animals and move them into the empty pens at that point. Keep a close eye on them during this period to look for signs of other issues that may be lingering and keeping these pigs from reaching their potential.