Pig Owner's News for the Hunter

Breeding – Post-Farrowing Problems

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The majority of sows' farrow without difficulty and raise healthy piglets if they are managed appropriately. Sows must produce enough milk to provide the nutrition that their piglets require. Ideally their teats should be evenly spaced so that the milk is divided equally among all teats. However, the front teats are spaced more widely than the hind teats, produce more milk and are more accessible when the sow is laying down to be nursed. Therefore, piglets suckling the front teats usually have faster growth rates. Piglets establish their teat order soon after birth and often continue to nurse the same teat until they are weaned. Smaller, weaker piglets are often forced to nurse the less productive rear teats. This further reduces their chance of survival. It is especially important to monitor these piglets. You should ensure there are enough nipples for the number of piglets and that all piglets are feeding and gaining weight.

Complete lactation failure (agalactia) is unusual in sows and gilts, however **lowered milk production (hypogalactia)** is relatively common. There are many causes of lowered milk production and these include poor nutrition for the sow, hormonal imbalances, disease organisms, mould toxins and temperature stresses. This can cause the death of piglets due to starvation, or under-nourished piglets which may scour or be laid on while trying to nurse. Hypogalactia (lowered milk production), occurs more frequently in fat sows and gilts, during extremely hot temperatures and in sows housed on contaminated wood shavings for bedding. Early recognition is critical to the survival of the piglets.

Feed intake of the sow should be increased gradually (to avoid constipation) post farrowing, with full feed (approx. 4-6 kgs) being fed by 5-6 days after farrowing. This will promote milk production and avoid excessive weight loss. Sows which are hungry and are awaiting feed time, may not allow piglets to nurse effectively.

Hypogalactia may also be accompanied by mastitis and metritis. Treatment of hypogalactia depends on the suspected cause, but is always aimed at quickly re-establishing milk flow to prevent piglet losses. Treatments which cause additional stress on the sow may further reduce milk production and milk let down. Your veterinarian may need to give the sow oxytocin to assist with milk let down.

Mastitis often presents as hot, red, hardened or swollen udders and the sow usually has a temperature and isn't interested in her feed. It can occur during lactation or at weaning. It is important that it is identified quickly and treated by a veterinarian. If left untreated it can become chronic with thick fibrous scar tissue and large lumps which may ulcerate. It can affect the sow's ability to feed this litter and future litters. The piglets of a sow with mastitis will be hungry, are often thin and will squeal due to lack of milk.

Metritis is inflammation of the uterus (womb) caused by a bacterial infection. Metritis is more likely to occur after a difficult farrowing or when assistance has been required. If the sow has a temperature, is not eating and has a large amount of foul smelling discharge, you need to call your private veterinarian.

A problem encountered during or after farrowing involves savaging, or the sow attempting to bite or kill her newborn piglets. Occasionally, a sow or gilt will bite or possibly kill first born piglets when they come near her head searching for a teat to nurse. Savaging occurs mostly in overly fat sows or gilts and in certain breeds or bloodlines. Savaging may be in response to the pain of the farrowing process, or the strange, new farrowing surroundings the sow or gilt is exposed to. Sometimes it is necessary to remove the piglets to a warm box until farrowing is complete. In extreme cases sedation may be required. Your vet will be able to advise if this is necessary.

Lack of appetite, hypogalactia and constipation are often found at the same time. Lack of appetite can be indicative of illness or constipation. It may be possible to improve feed intake by using a more palatable ration, feeding more frequently and cooling the environmental temperature. Always ensure there is cool, clean drinking water available. It is important to check the sow's temperature if she isn't eating. It is normal for the sow's temperature to rise from the normal 38.9°C to 39 or 40°C. However, if the temperature is over 41°C, you should contact your private veterinarian. A reduced appetite or elevated rectal temperature my indicate that the sow has retained her placenta.

Lameness can occur in sows after farrowing and can result in decreased milk production and reduced litter weight. Rough flooring can cause injuries to the foot pads or cause cuts and scrapes, which can then become infected causing lameness. Slippery flooring can also cause injuries and may discourage sows from attempting to get up, eat and move about. Fractures, especially in the pelvic area, can occur if there are mineral or vitamin deficiencies. In rare cases, lameness or rear leg paralysis may occur from injuries sustained during the delivery process of very large piglets.

It is essential to closely observe your sows post farrowing. Excessively active sows may not allow adequate nursing and may have an increased chance of stepping on or laying on their piglets. Mange or lice may contribute to excessive activity. In contrast, sows which rarely get up and are not seen to eat and drink may be sick or lame and often do not produce enough milk for their piglets. It is important to make sure that all sows get up every time you feed them

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